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# The Social Work Perspective on English Language Learners Entering Special Education

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## List of Abbreviations

AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
CLD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
ESL	English as a Second Language
ELLs	English Language Learners
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FAPE	Free Appropriate Public Education
IEP	Individualized Education Program
LEA	Local Education Authority
LEP	Limited English Proficient
IDEA	Individual with Disabilities Education Act of 2004
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Act
RTI	Response to Intervention
RTI	Responsive Instruction (in Virginia)

## Abstract

THE SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS  
ENTERING SPECIAL EDUCATION

By Kerry Fay Vandergrift

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012.

Director: Mary Katherine O'Connor, PhD  
Professor, School of Social Work

Grounded theory was used to examine the social work perspective on English language learners (ELLs) entering special education. Fourteen interviews were conducted with 11 current school social workers from seven counties and cities in Virginia. The resulting theory is that the core variable, *supporting ELLs*, is the best attempt to resolve the main concern, *the disconnect between the needs of ELLs and the resources available to them*. This grounded theory suggests social workers and other school personnel can support ELLs and avoid an inappropriate referral to special education through: (1) culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment outside of the special education process, with particular attention to needs related to trauma and language acquisition; and (2) connection to available culturally and linguistically appropriate resources to meet the identified needs. Key findings are organized into eight dimensions: the school setting; the policy context; the needs of ELLs, engaging families of ELLs; community connections; the professional setting; the special education process; and the profession of social work. Implications include recommendations for policy change, changes to school social work practice, and changes in social work education. Further research includes testing the theory by examining the relationships

between assessment, need, resource availability, and disproportional representation, as well as related areas of research such as the differences between high-ELL and low-ELL school divisions.

## Chapter One: Overview

*The call came on Thanksgiving as we sat down to eat. Alejandro was in a US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility awaiting deportation. He had recently turned 18 and a schoolyard scuffle briefly brought him into contact with the criminal justice system. Even though the charges were dropped, Alejandro was now known to ICE and his status as an undocumented immigrant--brought to the US as a young child--was enough to have him arrested and scheduled for deportation.*

*When I met Alejandro through a mentoring program he was a preteen, lanky and awkward, quick to boast and eager to please. He loved Michael Jackson and opera, fast cars and low-rider bicycles, his mom's Mexican food and Taco Bell. His family life was far from ideal, with a distant, alcoholic father, a devoted mother, and two younger sisters. They moved from one ramshackle place to another, barely making ends meet. His mother, the most important person in his life, valued church, family, and manual labor in that order; school was an afterthought.*

*He was struggling academically and his teacher believed it was because he did not speak or understand English very well. Thanks to a very involved school social worker and some advocacy on my part, we were able to secure a tutor who spoke Spanish. Then came the news: The tutor told us he did not speak English or Spanish very well. Maybe, she suggested, he had a learning disability. But nothing much came of it. He was pushed through school without a special education referral, some teachers telling me it was just a language problem, some thinking his academic problems were because of his behaviors or because he often*

*missed school. Mostly he flew under the radar, doing just enough to get by, sometimes causing trouble but smoothing things over with his quick wit and winning smile.*

*On that Thanksgiving day talking on the phone with a terrified Alejandro, the "whats" and "shoulds" and "woulds" ran through my mind. What was the real problem? Language? A learning disability? Poverty? Family expectations? Should he have entered special education? Would he have received the help he needed there? Would the stigma have made things worse for this sensitive boy? Would he have had access to services he didn't otherwise have? Or should something else have happened? Should he have received some kind of intensive language instruction? A case manager? A truancy officer? Therapy? Family financial assistance? Something else? What had gone wrong with Alejandro?*

In schools all over the country, teams of educators and other professionals struggle to meet the complex language, social, legal, emotional, and educational needs of ELL students like Alejandro. Many of these students are considered for placement in special education, which requires meeting federal criteria for a disability diagnosis. Unfortunately, research has not demonstrated how these ELL students are entering special education at disproportional rates compared to their non-ELL classmates (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010).

This is a classic grounded theory study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) on English language learners (ELLs) entering special education. Most of the research on ELLs entering special education is from the perspective of special educators and thus focused on education related elements of the process such as language acquisition and assessment (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). There is currently no research on this topic from the social work perspective. A social work focus introduces different dimensions to the research, such as the



psycho-social needs of ELLs (have they experienced trauma?) and community engagement (are ELLs accessing appropriate community resources?).

### **Research Area**

True to CGT, this research is based on an area not a question (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research area is *ELLs entering special education* from a social work perspective. The population of interest is a fairly small one, about half a million ELLs are in special education (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2008), but the topic is purposefully broad in phrasing. Six dimensions of ELLs entering special education were examined in the study.

### **Definitions**

Two words, “ELLs” and “entering,” are broader than they might first appear. ELL, English language learner, is an all-encompassing term for people at some stage of learning English (this term is discussed more in chapter two). However, only students officially classified as limited English proficient (LEP), are included in much of the research. When gathering data for this study, it was at the discretion of the participants to consider their responses to the inquiry based on their own assumptions about who ELLs are. In other words, I did not ask them to discuss their perspectives on only ELLs who have been tested and labeled LEP.

“Entering” was used to include all the stages of the decision-making process for students who may or may not eventually enter special education. This included the pre-referral stage through placement in special education. This meant if a social worker knew a student involved in pre-referral placement that was a child “entering” special education. However, similar to the non-official understanding of ELL, a social worker participating in this study also talked about experiences with students who *might* be considered for pre-

referral services—i.e., the social worker and regular education teacher have talked about interventions with a particular student but the student is not officially receiving pre-referral services. This is consistent with the pre-referral technique known as Response-to-Intervention (RTI), which includes universal application of intervention, so that in some ways *all* ELLs could be considered as participating in pre-referral techniques (Sabatino, 2009).

### **Key Dimensions**

There are six key dimensions for this research area. Grounded theory was approached with an open-mind and without preconceived ideas of the problem, or specific concepts. However, ethical research practices require the researcher to provide enough information about the research to potential participants so they may make an informed decision about participation. The key dimensions and related research findings are:

1. *Needs of ELLs*. ELLs, likely immigrants or children of immigrants, and have complex social and psychological needs. Acculturative stress, the stress experienced by immigrants adjusting to their new environment, is specific to immigrants and may lead to anxiety or depression (McBrien, 2004). Compared to non-immigrants students, these students experience higher rates of psychological problems (Capps &Fortuny, 2006; Reardon-Anderson, Capps & Fix, 2002), are more likely to experience low self-esteem (Furuto, 2004), and are more likely to be in fair or poor health (Capps &Fortuny, 2006). Some studies have found Latinos are more likely to be diagnosed with adjustment disorders, anxiety disorders, and psychotic disorders (Yeh, et al., 2002), and have higher rates of substance abuse (Tapia, Schwartz, Prado, Lopez, and Pantin, 2006).

2. *Engaging families of ELLs.* Working with families to develop plans for their children is codified in the IDEA but seems to be a struggle in practice. Parents of ELLs often have negative experiences with the special education system and may experience discrimination (e.g., Bailey, 1999; Klingner & Harry, 2006; McHatton & Corea, 2005; Torres-Burgo, Reyes-Wasson, & Brusa-Vega, 1999). For example, Torres-Burgo, Reyes-Wasson, and Brusa-Vega (1999) compared Hispanic to non-Hispanic parents and found Hispanic parents were: less engaged by school personnel in the special education process; knew less about their child's disability and related services; and were less likely to be satisfied with their school involvement.
3. *Community connections.* ELLs and their families often require community services, which may be brokered through the schools. This dimension includes availability, access, and appropriateness of community services for immigrant families, particularly in light of their unique challenges. Problems unique to immigrants include differential acculturation (Tapia, Schwartz, Prado, Lopez, Pantin, 2006), circular migration (Pine & Drachman, 2005), and families with a mix of legal statuses (Capps, et al., 2006). Immigrant families are often in poverty, experience crowded housing and food shortages (e.g., Capps & Fortuny, 2006), and are more likely than non-immigrants to live in low SES neighborhoods (Pong & Hao, 2007). (I recognize that schools are part of the community, but for this research, the community includes the resources outside of the school. See Tellez and Waxman [2010] for a discussion of this distinction).
4. *Professional setting.* Various professionals—educators, psychologists, school administrators, social workers, and others—help children and families through the special education process. In a study about professional collaboration when working

with culturally and linguistically diverse students with exceptionalities, Roache, Shore, Gouleta, and Butkevich (2003) found professionals in metro DC did not have adequate administrative support or a good understanding of each other's roles.

5. *Special education process.* The special education process for ELLs begins during the pre-referral phase, when a regular education teacher or someone else notices a potential disability, and continues through placement in special education. Though the decisions along the way are usually meant to be made in a collaborative fashion between professionals and family members, research on decision-making for ELLs entering special education demonstrates very little collaboration and negative attitudes towards parents (Klingner & Harry, 2006).
6. *Social work.* There is no research from a social work perspective or focused on social workers related to ELLs entering special education. Worth noting, though, is Klingner and Harry's (2006) finding that social workers, along with parents, were the least influential team members during special education placement meetings and Bailey's (1999) finding that Hispanic parents satisfied with special education services often mentioned a person, such as a social worker, who helped guide them through the process.

### **Population**

There are just under half a million ELLs in special education, or 7.4% of all students receiving special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Many immigrants are *not* ELLs, and some ELLs are children or even grandchildren of immigrants (Capps, et al., 2006). However, as immigrant growth continues so will the number of ELL students (Capps & Fortuny, 2006). As immigrants move from traditionally settled immigrant areas, such as

New York and California, to states that have not had many immigrants, community institutions such as schools will have to adapt to this new-to-them population (Capps, Fix & Passel, 2002).

### **Special Education Context**

ELLs entering special education fall within the context of special education rules and regulations developed for all children entering special education. Federal special education policy provides the overarching guidelines for special education, though states develop their own rules and regulations. A child becomes eligible for special education through a referral and placement process, with a relatively new emphasis on pre-referral activity.

#### **What is Special Education?**

Special education and related services are provided under Part B of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), first authorized in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act signaled a "veritable revolution," mandating, for the first time, that children with special needs were entitled to specialized services in public schools (Altshuler, 2007, p. 24). Prior to the Act's passage, teachers, parents, or administrators could simply request that a child be excluded from school without meeting any agreed upon definition of "handicapped" (Altshuler, 2007, p. 24). A million children were excluded from public schools (some were able to attend private schools, if their families had the means) and many more did not receive appropriate educational services (Altshuler, 2007).

The current iteration of IDEA was passed in 2004, with final regulations published in 2006. In the IDEA:

... 'special education' means specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including—

(A) instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and (B) instruction in physical education.(20 U.S.C. §1401[29])

The law has undergone significant changes since 1975, such as an emphasis on early intervention, but has retained the rights contained in the original version of the law. States develop their own policies and regulations in order to comply with the federal law and therefore how the law is applied may differ state to state (Altshuler, 2007).

There are a number of key special education concepts contained within the IDEA. All children have the right to a free and appropriate education (FAPE). This provision was included in the 1975 Act and still exists today. Children are also required to be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible. Services span from consultation on the least restrictive end to institutional placement on the most restrictive end, and schools are required to choose the LRE that meets the child's needs (Altshuler, 2007). The LRE is designed to maximize the time a student spends with non-disabled peers (Altshuler, 2007).

Two key concepts related to service provision for students entering special education at the multidisciplinary team (MDT) and the Individualized Education Program (IEP). The MDT is a team of professionals and family members who are involved in a student's evaluations and assessments, and are included in placement and ongoing educational decisions. The MDT includes: a general education teacher; a special education teacher; an administrator; the student's parents; the student, when age appropriate; and additional members as necessary (though these are not required). The IEP is developed when a child is

placed in special education, and is reviewed every year thereafter, to determine progress towards educational goals, and towards maintaining the child in the LRE.

### **How is a Special Education Placement Made?**

Prior to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, children could be deemed "handicapped" and removed from the classroom because the "child's handicap was making it too difficult for the child or peers to learn, or for the teacher to teach" (Altshuler, 2007, p. 24). Now, the special education process is generally seven steps: "1. Pre-referral; 2. Referral; 3. Identification; 4. Eligibility; 5. Development of the IEP; 6. Implementation of the IEP; 7. Evaluation and reviews" (Smith, 2007, p. 56)." Pre-referral activities address educational and behavioral problems using intervention-based assessments (Smith, 2007). The referral is a request for evaluation for special education by either a school official or a parent (Smith, 2007). (In the case of preschool age children, the IDEA emphasis on "child find" means referrals may come from social service agencies, doctors, and others who observe the child [Smith, 2007]). An MDT uses a variety of assessments, including formal tests (e.g., intelligence tests) and less formal observations (e.g., behaviors) to identify children with disabilities (Smith, 2007). Once a child is identified as having a disability, eligibility for specific services is determined (Smith, 2007). An IEP is developed, implemented, and usually reviewed and modified annually (Smith, 2007).

Though outcomes vary by LEA, one study found once children are referred for evaluation 85% are deemed eligible for special education services (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, & Wishner, 1994). Therefore, there is increasing emphasis on activity *before* the request for evaluation, called pre-referral techniques (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008). If pre-referral techniques do not mitigate concerns, an evaluation is conducted within 60 days of the request, or other

timeframe, as established by the state (Smith, 2007). If a multi-disciplinary team the evaluation shows the child (1) fits the criteria for at least one disability and (2) because of the disability, needs special education, an IEP is developed (Smith, 2007).

### **A Problem Statement**

A classic grounded theory study does not have a problem statement because the problem emerges from the data. In this study, disproportionality was *a* problem, not *the* problem. It is a major problem, of course, but in this study it was the indicator that this topic needs to be explored. Disproportionality is the result of some problem that exists with ELLs entering special education, and that problem was identified by this research process (Glaser, 1998).

There is an expectation that categories of students, such as ELLs, should be represented in special education at about the same rate as their rate in the population (National Association of Bilingual Education, 2002). If ELLs are 10% of a school district, they should be about 10% of the special education population. That is not the case. This situation, called disproportional representation or disproportionality, can occur as underrepresentation but is more often overrepresentation for ELLs (e.g., Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). There are many possible explanations for this, including discrimination and bias (e.g., Beratan, 2008; Harry & Anderson, 1994), inadequate assessment and evaluation procedures (e.g., Palmer, Olivarez, Wilson & Fordyce, 1989), and socio-economic factors (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb & Wishner, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Interestingly, disproportionality exists for disabilities that require subjective diagnoses, e.g., learning disabilities, and not for disabilities that require objective diagnosis, e.g., hearing impairment (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Klingner & Artiles, 2003; Donovan & Cross, 2002).



## **Social Work and ELLs Entering Special Education**

Reading the literature, which is mostly from a special education perspective (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010), one would not know what role, if any, social workers have with ELLs entering special education. School social workers have a unique position in bridging the gaps between school and family, family and community, and even student and family, as well as providing direct services, such as running groups. They certainly have the potential to provide vital connections and services, and this research was intended to identify what they are doing already, what they could be doing, and their perspective and how things could change and improve.

Social workers have provided services to immigrants since the beginning of the profession. Many settlement houses were located in immigrant communities and Jane Addams was an advocate for livable conditions for immigrants, demonstrating that community programs helped immigrants (Addams, 1899, in Tellez & Waxman, 2010). School social workers, called visiting teachers at the time, were working with immigrants in the schools as early as the 1920's (Shaffer, 2008). Though social work practice has evolved over time, the problems we face dealing with immigrant families remain similar nearly one hundred years later (Shaffer, 2008)

Based on our education and training it seems immigrants are no longer central to our work (Engstrom & Okamura, 2007), though perhaps they should be. With their continued growth in real numbers and expansion from traditionally settled immigrant areas to new areas (Capps, Fix, & Passel, 2002; Capps & Fortuny, 2006) more and more social workers will come into contact with immigrants or their children. Working with immigrants and their families is increasingly not a decision for school social workers; it is inevitable.

Based on my own search, detailed in chapter two, as well as a recent article that looked at research on overrepresentation of ELLs in special education spanning decades (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010), I concluded that there is no research on ELLs entering special education from a social work perspective or that significantly includes social workers. Even a recent study on professional collaboration did not include social workers as a category of professional working with culturally and linguistically diverse students with exceptionalities (Roache, Shore, Gouleta, & Butkevich, 2003).

### **Theory**

Since the goal of this study was to *discover* a theory, one theory is not used to support the dimensions of the study. However, two aspects of theory will be discussed here. First, a brief discussion of the use of theory as it relates to current social work practice with ELLs. Second, an overview of the empowerment approach and how it provided a framework for engaging participants and thinking about concepts and theoretical connections in the study.

### **Social Work Practice With ELLs**

Social workers can choose from dozens of theories, models, and perspectives for working with ELLs and for evaluating the policies and practices that affect them. Generally, the approaches used with ELLs are the same as those used with non-ELLs, with an emphasis on the importance of cultural competency (Fong, 2004; Furuto, 2004). Theories related to ELLs would be familiar to most social workers: for example, the ecological model and the strengths perspective in the intervention literature, and critical theory and feminist theory in the policy analysis literature.

Cultural competency is an important foundational concept for work with ELLs—indeed, all social work practice—and one which will be dealt with only briefly here.

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the largest and most influential professional social work membership organization, cultural competence is:

The process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of the individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each. (NASW, 2001, p. 8)

Though the NASW and others have provided frameworks and recommendations, there is not one “right” way to culturally competent practice.

### **The Empowerment Approach**

The empowerment approach is a way of understanding where power is and is not, and how it can be reallocated when necessary (Lee, 2001). It is an *approach*, intended to provide both a framework for understanding individuals and society, and steps to take action (Lee, 2001). It is generally action oriented, with a caveat that research may be about problem identification and information gathering without the action element. This research mostly involved gathering information (the core variable and related concepts), but for the purpose of developing a theory which is useful to social workers and their clients (Glaser, 1978).

The central element of empowerment is multifocal vision. Multifocal vision includes five lenses: a historic perspective of oppression; an ecological view; ethclass, feminist, cultural and critical perspectives; a multicultural perspective; and a global perspective (Lee, 2001). These five perspectives are used in conjunction to identify and assess power. Ironically, this approach to understanding power requires a great deal of fore-knowledge which may not be known to many clients (e.g., what is a critical perspective?).

Classic grounded theory requires that assumptions are not made about concepts and theoretical connections prior to data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978), and this can be done within the framework of an empowerment approach. The empowerment approach does not predetermine where the power lies, nor does it require for the purpose of research that power be identified—data can simply be gathered to describe a problem (Lee, 2001). The goal of this research was certainly focused on the latter, data gathering and analysis. While the goal of this study was not explicitly to examine power distribution and relationships, it was inevitable that there was an eye towards this based on the research area itself. *ELLs entering special education* is about power—the decision-makers, the policy, the funding, and on and on. Some one, some group, some entity, some *thing*, is guiding the process of placing ELLs in special education, and thus holding the power.

### **Methodology**

This is a classic grounded theory (CGT) study, which is the term for both the methodology and the results (Glaser, 1967). It is a qualitative study designed to discover a substantive theory related to ELLs entering special education from the social work perspective. A CGT begins with a research area, not a question or research problem--in this case, the area was ELLs entering special education. I was open to all data, even that which might contradict my understanding of the topic, and using a constant comparison process, grounded the theory in data. The constant comparison process involves cycling between coding, sampling, data collection, and memoing. The final stages of CGT are sorting and writing the theory.

School social workers from across Virginia were interviewed using a semi-structured interview, with open-ended questions about key dimensions of the research area. The key

dimensions of the area were: the needs of ELLs; engaging families of ELLs; professional setting; the special education process; community engagement; and social work. Interviews were conducted face-to-face whenever feasible, and by telephone when necessary. Interviews lasted for about one hour, with some follow-ups to expand concepts and check in on my interpretation of the data.

The constant comparison process is an analytic process that occurs during data collection. Following the first interviews, the notes were open coded, that is, attaching as many concepts as needed to every segment of data. As data collection continued, a core variable emerged and the codes became more focused on expanding the concepts related to that variable. The set of codes are called substantive codes, the categories of empirical information. During the coding and data collection process, memos were used to expand on the concepts and explore theoretical connections. The second type of code applied to the data, which is linked to these memos, is theoretical codes. These are the codes that explain how the data are connected and contain the hypotheses for the theory. When theoretical saturation is reached, that is when the data are not supplying any new information about the core variable, sampling ends and sorting begins. Sorting is the process of organizing the data and associated codes and memos into the grounded theory.

## **Results**

The grounded theory is that *supporting ELLs* (the core variable) resolves *the disconnect between the needs of ELLs and the resources available to them* (the main concern). The grounded theory suggests that accurately identifying the needs of ELLs in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways and linking them to appropriate resources can reduce disproportional representation. Often, assessment of any kind—culturally and linguistically

appropriate or not—does not occur until a special education referral is made, missing the opportunity to identify needs early. Once needs are identified, the resources are often not available, accessible, or appropriate for ELLs.

The theory, at first glance, is not directly related to ELLs entering special education. What I found was social workers were eager to talk about the needs of ELLs and the special education process presented special challenges (e.g., language, engaging families), but it was not the main concern. Mostly, social workers believed the right students being referred and found eligible for special education but, left behind sometimes, were the students who had serious needs and no school or community resources to meet them. This could be called a *benevolent referral* to special education; that is, a pragmatic approach to getting some kind of services to a child who needed more than was available through non-special education approaches. Of course, the potential results included disproportional representation in special education and a lifelong stigma of being labeled as having a disability.

The special education process itself varied greatly from division to division. Some enthusiastically embraced classroom techniques to improve learning, using teams to identify potential changes in the classrooms. Some divisions had instituted rigorous Response to Intervention (RTI) techniques, including teacher assistance teams and whole school or whole class interventions. In divisions with more ELLs, there seemed to be culturally and linguistically appropriate approaches to assessment and evaluation. Some divisions struggled with appropriate assessment. While most divisions had access to translation and interpretation services, not all participants knew how to use them, and sometimes only the dominant languages had translated document or adequate interpreter services.

The findings here are from the social work perspective only, but it seems the social worker has her (no male social workers agreed to participate) finger on the pulse of the school. The role of social worker varied greatly among the divisions, though all seemed stretched thin whether she mentioned it explicitly or not. Social workers recognized the agonizing pressure teachers and administrators are under to meet federal policy requirements. They also astutely evaluated their colleagues, communities, and society when thinking about how best to meet the needs of ELL students.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter I argue that research on ELLs entering special education from a social work perspective is timely, necessary, and appropriate. The first section speaks to the timeliness of the research, the second to the necessity, and the third to the appropriateness of the study. The final sections describe the theoretical framework for the study and introduce the methodology.

In the first section, *English Language Learners*, there is an overview of ELL's. They are growing in number and in geographic location, resulting in the likelihood that school social workers will come into contact with them, and they have unique needs compared to non-ELLs. Next, *ELLs in Special Education* contains a discussion of policies, research on practices, and outcomes. While there are policies and practices developed to support and encourage good outcomes for ELLs in schools, the effect is not always positive. One of the most startling outcomes for ELLs is that they are more likely than non-ELLs to be disproportionately represented in special education; the causes of this are not clear.

In *Social Work and ELLs Entering Special Education* I argue that social work has both the values commitment and ability to provide some of the necessary services to ELLs entering special education, making it surprising that there is no research on this topic from a social work perspective. Using an empowerment approach, described in the section *Empowerment Approach*, will provide a framework for considering the problem without conflicting with grounded theory.



## English Language Learners

### Who are ELLs?

English language learners (ELLs) are people whose primary language is not English and who are at some stage of acquiring English. There are many terms associated with this population. Limited English proficient (LEP) is perhaps the most commonly used term, coined as part of the 1975 “Lau remedies,” a U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (the current Department of Health and Human Services) memorandum describing remedies related to the *Lau v Nichols* (1971) Supreme Court decision, in which San Francisco schools were found to not be providing Chinese students with adequate linguistically appropriate resources (Stevens, 1983). The term LEP was used in the 2004 iteration of Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Because LEP is defined in IDEA, many federal, state, local, and agency reports use the term. Language teachers for ELL children are often called ESL (English as a second language) teachers, and the process may be described as TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) or ESOL (English for speakers of other languages). Labels for the ELL population include culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and limited English proficient (LEP). CLD is a positive term, but is too broad for this research as it is sometimes used to include non-ELLs.

The term ELL will be used throughout this research, because it is a positive representation of the learning process. The developer of the term describes it this way: "we refer to... 'physics majors' rather than... 'students with limited physics proficiency'" (La Celle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994). However, when discussing research from other authors, the term used by the original author(s) will be used as it often represents a specific definition (e.g, the federal definition of LEP).

**ELLs nationwide.** Not all immigrants are ELLs, and not all ELLs are immigrants. In 2000 one in five school age children, 10.8 million, were children of immigrants but only 3.4 million of them were classified as LEP (Capps, et al., 2006). This classification relies on a parent report of a child's spoken English proficiency and may be underestimated (Capps, et al., 2006). Clearly, ELL is not synonymous with immigrant, as the majority of ELL students are native born. From pre-kindergarten to fifth grade, 24 percent of ELL students are first generation, 59 percent are second generation, and 18 percent are third generation immigrants (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Hernandez, 2005, p.16). In grades six to twelve, the nativity of ELL students is 44 percent first generation, 27 percent second generation, and 29 percent third generation (Capps et al., 2005, p. 17). Particularly surprising about this data is that nearly one in five ELLs are third generation—native born children, with native born parents (Capps et al, 2005, p.17).

In 2001, about 50 percent of all public schools had at least one LEP student (Zehler et al, 2003, p. 28), and that percentage will grow as the number of immigrants continues to grow and as immigrants increasingly settle in new areas. In 2000, one in nine U.S. residents was an immigrant (Capps & Fortuny, 2006). Researchers predict that if current levels of immigration are maintained in 2010 the foreign-born population in the United States will be over 13% of the total population (Capps & Fortuny, 2006).

Immigrants have been concentrated in the six largest states, but are quickly dispersing to “new growth” states. The top ten new growth states experienced between 135% and 274% growth, and 22 states experienced over 91% growth in immigration (Capps, Fix, & Passel, 2002). These 22 new growth states are often unprepared to deal with an influx of immigrants since “most of them experienced little or no immigration during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”

(Capps & Fortuny, 2006). Compared to immigrants in old growth areas, immigrants to new growth areas are more likely to be undocumented, poorer, and less educated (Capps & Fortuny, 2006) which means schools and other community institutions will need to make major changes in order to serve these families appropriately.

Nationwide, about three-quarters of ELLs speak Spanish, though that varies by area (Capps et al., 2006). The predominance of Spanish is not surprising given that most immigrant children are from Mexico (38 percent), and the majority of immigrant children (55 percent, including Mexico) were born in Latin American or the Caribbean (Capps et al., 2006). A quarter of school-age immigrant were born in Asian countries, and the rest were born in Canada, Europe, Oceania, and Africa (Capps et al., 2006).

**ELLs in Virginia.** In Virginia, between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of children of immigrants for prekindergarten to fifth grade increased by 51 percent (Capps, et al., 2006). During the same time period in Virginia, the percentage of children of immigrants for sixth to twelfth grade increased by 72 percent (Capps, et al., 2006). In 2000, for both age groups, children of immigrants were 13 percent of children in Virginia schools (Capps, et al., 2006) with considerable regional differences in levels of immigration (Virginia Department of Education [VA DOE], 2008).

In Virginia schools in 2008, LEP students were a little over 7% of the public school population, 87,026 of 1,235,746 students (VA DOE, 2008). The number and percentages of LEP students in Virginia schools varies greatly by LEA, with the highest concentrations in Northern Virginia (VA DOE, 2008). A few Virginia LEAs list no LEP students, but most report increases in LEP between 1993 and 2008 (VA DOE, 2008). Fairfax County has over 34,000 LEP children, the most by far of any LEA in Virginia, followed by Prince William

County (13,157) and Arlington County (5,275) (VA DOE, 2008). In Fairfax County, 44 percent of children speak one of over 100 languages other than English at home (Fairfax County Government 2009). Despite the presence of ELLs, in a study of two districts in Virginia over 80 percent of social workers did not know an ESL program existed until they took the job in the public schools; ESL has been in Virginia schools for almost 30 years (Whitworth, 2000).

### **Special needs of ELLs**

The label ELL defines a group of students by their language skills, but the characteristics of ELLs in addition to language ability provide an impetus for social work intervention with this population. As noted before, ELLs and immigrants are not interchangeable concepts; however, many ELL students are immigrants or are children of immigrants (Capps et al., 2005). The challenges described below are problems faced by immigrants and thusly applicable to the ELL population. While this section focuses on the challenges of working with immigrants as a way of demonstrating why social work intervention with this population is important, it is important to note that immigrant families have many unique strengths (e.g., resilience, determination) and social workers would certainly draw on those strengths when engaging immigrant families (Fong, 2004).

Using a person-in-environment lens, a brief overview of challenges facing ELLs at the individual, systems, and environmental level is described. A key element of person-in-environment is the interplay between levels and how the individual experiences each of these intersections. The challenges described in each level are not exclusive (e.g., an *individual* problem of acculturative stress would not be present without pressure from the *systems* and *environmental* levels). Finally, ELLs face daunting challenges at the

environmental level. At this level, social workers may intervene indirectly through advocacy, or direct interventions such as community organizing. The families of ELLs face societal level challenges including resource distribution, conflicting societal values, stressful economic conditions, language, immigration laws, discrimination, and legal status (Furuto, 2004; Fong, 2004). Further, despite higher poverty rates and other identified health and social needs, children in immigrant families are less likely to receive public benefits due to the ineligibility of parents, language issues, concerns about documentation, and mistrust of government (Reardon-Anderson et al, 2002; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2006).

**Individual level.** Children who are ELLs are not always immigrants, but are likely to have immigrant parents (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto, 2005) and, thus, may either experience these individual challenges themselves or have parents who are struggling with some of these problems. These individual level problems are likely to benefit from direct social work intervention, such as individual counseling. Some problems may require referrals to other professionals who specialize in working with immigrant children.

Psychological problems are present at higher rates in immigrant families than non-immigrant families (Capps & Fortuny, 2006; Reardon-Anderson, Capps & Fix, 2002). Compared to children born to native parents, children of immigrants are more likely to experience low self-esteem (Furuto, 2004). In one study focused on ethnic minorities at a mental health clinic, researchers found among Latinos there were higher rates of diagnosis for adjustment disorders, anxiety disorders, and psychotic disorders (Yeh, et al., 2002). There are high rates of substance abuse among Latino youth, which increases if they drop out of school (Tapia, Schwartz, Prado, Lopez, and Pantin, 2006). Acculturative stress is the stress that immigrants experience when adjusting to their new environment. Acculturative stress can lead

to anxiety or depression, which is common to immigrants and particularly acute for refugees (McBrien, 2004, p.330). Finally, immigrants are more likely to be in fair or poor health than non-immigrants (Capps & Fortuny, 2006).

**Systems level.** ELLs and their families face a host of family and community level problems, from their socioeconomic position to citizenship designations. Most relevant to this research, is the school factors which can effect education outcomes for ELLs. Social workers may use a combination of skills to address the problems at the systems level, such as case management and advocacy.

**Family and community.** Immigrant families experience some problems at higher rates than non-immigrant families, or the same concept may be experienced for different reasons for an immigrant (e.g., loneliness when separated by thousands of miles from friends and family). Compared to non-immigrant families, immigrant families are more likely to face financial problems, including problems related to poverty such as rates of crowded housing, health insurance coverage, and food shortages (Capps &Fortuny, 2006; Fong 2004; Reardon-Anderson, Capps & Fix, 2002). Half of ELL students have a parent without high school diplomas (Capps, et al., 2006). Immigrants may have difficulty communicating with helping professionals, may experience role confusion (often gender related), have increased family tension, and experience loneliness (Furuto, 2004; Fong, 2004). Immigrant youth are more isolated than native youth (Gaytan, Cayhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007) and more likely to live in low SES neighborhoods with a higher proportion of foreign-born people (Pong and Hao, 2007).

Some problems experienced exclusively by immigrants--such as differential acculturation, circular migration, and the mixed-status of families--may require unique

interventions. Differential acculturation, a concept which describes the different rates at which children and parents generally are exposed to and adopt American culture, can create challenges in the adult-child relationship around issues such as respect for adults and adoption of American cultural practices (Tapia, Schwartz, Prado, Lopez, Pantin, 2006, p. 148). Some immigrant families are transnational or experience “circular migration,” meaning the families may travel to their native countries frequently or they may travel infrequently for long periods of time, because they retain close familial and social ties there (Board on Children and Families, 1995; Pine & Drachman, 2005). This can be particularly disruptive for children in school, and can affect immigration status, acculturation levels, and school performance (Pine & Drachman, 2005). Finally, most immigrant families are “mixed-status,” meaning they are composed of various immigration classifications, including legal permanent residents, naturalized citizens, refugees, undocumented immigrants, and temporary residents (Capps & Passel, 2004). The mixed status of families can lead to complicated legal situations and may make parents less likely to interact with school personnel or other officials for fear of deportation or other problems (Capps, et al., 2006).

***School.*** Structural issues associated with schools immigrant children are attending may be another factor that limits their potential for success and may increase negative psychosocial outcomes. ELL children often attend high-ELL concentration schools (e.g., Pong & Hao, 2007), with “nearly 70 percent of LEP students enrolled in 10 percent of elementary schools” (de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005, p. 10). Compared to low-LEP schools, high-LEP have more associated negative characteristics including: larger class sizes; higher incidence of student poverty; more student health problems; higher rates of tardiness and absenteeism; less preparation; teachers are more likely to be unqualified and vacancies

are harder to fill; parental involvement levels are lower; and principals are likely to have less education and training, fewer years of experience, and less time in their current position (de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005).

Negative school climate is significantly associated with GPA for children of both native and immigrant parents, (Pong & Hao, 2007). LEP students drop out of school at the highest rates of all students (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D’Emilio, 2005), e.g., 35.8 percent in New York City and 22.6 percent in Houston (Zehr, 2009). LEP students score lower than any other category of students on academic achievement tests (Abedi, 2004), though research indicates if they receive appropriate accommodations scores may be improved in certain instances (Kopriva, 2007).

### **ELLs in Special Education**

In 2007, the most recent data available, there were 490,949 LEP students ages 3 through 21 receiving special education services, 7.40 percent of all students receiving special education services (U.S. Department of Education [U.S. DOE], 2008). Over 700,000, or 24.4 percent, of teachers worked with at least one LEP student receiving special education in 2001 when there were only about 350,000 ELL students in special education (Zehler, et al., 2003, p. 28). In the fall of 2007 in Virginia, the number of ELL students receiving Part B services was 4,154, which was 2.47 percent of all students receiving Part B services (U.S. DOE, 2008).

ELL students entering special education, and the educators and other professionals who come into contact with them, are subject to a number of mandates in policies, as well as trends in practices. Relevant federal policies include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB). Practices, such as the emphasis on pre-referral interventions and collaboration with families are often



required by these policies (which may, of course, have been influenced by research on practices that were already occurring in schools).

### **Policies related to ELLs in Special Education**

ELL students in this study sit at the crossroads of two major pieces of federal legislation: IDEA and NCLB. The IDEA is the most recent iteration of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), and is the legislation that requires all children receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE), including children with disabilities. Special education mandates are included in the IDEA. The NCLB Act (2001) is intended for all students in school, not just those with disabilities, and contained major changes to the earlier Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).

Both IDEA and NCLB contain provisions addressing the needs of ELL's, though from quite different perspectives. IDEA, generally, is focused on the challenges teachers and ELL students face, which may result in disproportional identification for special education services. NCLB is more focused on obtaining English fluency in as short a time period as possible.

**IDEA.**For the first time, in the IDEA (2004), disproportionality is expected to be addressed by school systems. States are required to (a) have related policies and procedures, (b) collect and evaluate data about disproportional representation, (c) review and revise related policies, practices, and procedures, (d) disaggregate data on suspension and expulsion rates, and (e) examine LEA's disproportionality rates (United States Department of Education, 2007). Funding is available to address problematic levels of representation. Contained within the law are concerns about disproportional representation of minority students: “more minority children continue to be served in special education than would be expected from the

percentage of minority students in the general school population.” Specific attention is given to LEP students which are called the "fastest growing population in our nation." The law calls for both recruitment of minority teachers and improvements in identifying the special needs of LEP students.

The IDEA includes social work services as one of a group of related services to children with disabilities [Title 1 A Sec 602(26)(A)]. These services include:

- Preparing a social or developmental history on a child with a disability;
- Group and individual counseling with the child and family;
- Working in partnership with parents and others on those problems in a child's living situation (home, school, and community) that affect the child's adjustment in school;
- Mobilizing school and community resources to enable the child to learn as effectively as possible in his or her educational program; and
- Assisting in developing positive behavioral intervention strategies.

(Part 300(A)(300.34)(c)(14))

A case manager or social worker is not a required member of an IEP team, and the only federal education-focused recommendation for social work is that there be a ratio of 1 social worker to 800 students in the NCLB Act of 2001 (Raines, 2006).

**NCLB.** The NCLB emphasized four strategies in educating children in America: increased accountability; increased choices for students and parents; increased flexibility for states, school districts, and schools; and increased emphasis on reading. The NCLB requires “special education students...to meet the same state educational standards as all other students” (Cortellia, 2007, p. 5). This is expected to be achieved through the IEP which is supposed to “provide the extra support needed” to reach this goal (Cortellia, 2007, p. 5).

However, many states have fallen short on including ELL students in testing, nine states did not assess the required 95 percent of students, and assessment rates for students with disabilities were the lowest of subgroups measured (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Special emphasis on ELL's, called LEP's under the NCLB Act, has been included in the legislation since its inception. Since 2002, requirements have changed and new programs have been introduced within NCLB. In 2006, educating ELL students was called a "top priority" and closing the achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students an "urgent national priority." Title III of the NCLB Act, authorizes the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (OELA) to administer grants, recommend policies and practices for meeting the needs of ELL's, strengthening collaboration and coordination among federal, state, and local programs, and monitor funded programs and provide technical assistance.

In order to reach the goal to have all students read and do math at grade level, changes made to Title I included increased flexibility for factoring in the performance of recently arrived LEP students, students attending United States schools for 12 months or less, in calculating Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) totals, and a requirement to include recently arrived ELL students in math assessments and added science assessments in the coming years. A partnership to provide states with technical assistance to make content assessments more "accessible and appropriate" has been formed. Though more than \$13 billion a year was available for ELL students, the focus of the changes was on flexibility for states and schools in reaching AYP goals, and improving assessment, not on helping schools teach English to ELL students.

## **Practices with ELLs Entering Special Education**

Practice with ELL children who may be referred to, or are already receiving, special education services is an ongoing series of collaborations and decisions by professionals and family members. This section of the review will begin with overviews of studies about family members of ELL special education students, followed by a description of a study on collaboration among professionals serving culturally and linguistically diverse students with exceptionalities (CLDE). Finally, there is a summary of a key study on the referral and decision making process for ELLs entering special education.

**Pre-referral.** Prior to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, children could be deemed "handicapped" and removed from the classroom because the "child's handicap was making it too difficult for the child or peers to learn, or for the teacher to teach" (Altshuler, 2007, p. 24). Now, the special education process is generally seven steps: "1. Pre-referral; 2. Referral; 3. Identification; 4. Eligibility; 5. Development of the IEP; 6. Implementation of the IEP; 7. Evaluation and reviews" (Smith, 2007, p. 56)." Pre-referral activities address educational and behavioral problems using intervention-based assessments (Smith, 2007). The referral is a request for evaluation for special education by either a school official or a parent (Smith, 2007). (In the case of preschool age children, the IDEA emphasis on "child find" means referrals may come from social service agencies, doctors, and others who observe the child [Smith, 2007]). An MDT uses a variety of assessments, including formal tests (e.g., intelligence tests) and less formal observations (e.g., behaviors) to identify children with disabilities (Smith, 2007). Once a child is identified as having a disability, eligibility for specific services is determined (Smith, 2007). An IEP is developed, implemented, and usually reviewed and modified annually (Smith, 2007).

Though outcomes vary by LEA, one study found once children are referred for evaluation 85% are deemed eligible for special education services (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, & Wishner, 1994). Therefore, there is increasing emphasis on activity *before* the request for evaluation, called pre-referral techniques (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008). If pre-referral techniques do not mitigate concerns, an evaluation is conducted within 60 days of the request, or other timeframe, as established by the state (Smith, 2007). If a multi-disciplinary team the evaluation shows the child (1) fits the criteria for at least one disability and (2) because of the disability, needs special education, an IEP is developed (Smith, 2007).

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a pre-referral practice included in amendments to the 2004 IDEA. Rather than rely on a “principle of failure” that was typical of previous involvement with special education, that is a child must be behind academically before intervention, RTI takes place before a student fails (Sabatino, 2009). RTI requires increasingly more individualized levels of intervention, beginning with universal changes and improvements to learning environments and ending with specific interventions with at-risk students (Sabatino, 2009). RTI is not intended only for educators. A series of documents prepared by representatives from professions involved in special education—including speech-language pathologists, educators, psychologists, and social workers—describes the role each profession has in RTI. Roles for social workers include:

- Assisting administrators and staff to understand the familial, cultural and community components of students’ responses to instruction, learning and academic success.
- Continuing the traditional school social work role of serving as the liaison to families, the community and other stakeholders to ensure open communication and continuing dialogue.

- Facilitating and coordinating the delivery of educational and mental health services with and by community agencies and service providers.

(School Social Work Association of America, 2006)

Even if not familiar with such detailed role suggestions, Sabatino believes social workers are likely in compliance with RTI, though they may not use the language of RTI or make specific links to RTI (2009). Educators Klingner and Harry (2003) suggest RTI may actually be able to replace deficit models, in which IQ tests are compared to performance.

**Engaging families.** Family involvement in the special education process is an integral part of IDEA. Engaging families can be difficult and is all the more complicated when language and cultural issues must be considered. Immigrant parents experience with special education services in schools is generally negative, and discrimination is both perceived and evident through observed interactions (e.g., Bailey, 1999; Klingner & Harry, 2006; McHatton & Corea, 2005; Torres-Burgo, Reyes-Wasson & Brusa-Vega, 1999). The four themes found in critical analysis of dozens of studies of collaboration with CLD families are “...cross-cultural differences in understandings of the meaning of disability, deficit views of CLD families, cultural conflicts in the setting of transition goals, and differential understanding of caregivers’ role in the education system” (Harry, 2008). The family collaboration landscape is grim.

Torres-Burgo, Reyes-Wasson, and Brusa-Vega (1999) undertook a study of Hispanic parents in a large Midwestern city, to determine if there were differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic parents experiences with the special education process. During the IEP process, Hispanic parents were significantly less likely to have their rights explained to them in their native language, asked significantly less if they understood the process, were

significantly less aware of the severity rating of their child's disability, and were significantly less aware of the delivery system to provide services to their child (Torres-Burgo et al., 1999). Regarding communication between home and school, Hispanic parents communicated significantly less with their child's special education teacher, and were offered significantly less advice about how to help their child at home (Torres-Burgo et al., 1999). Hispanic parents were significantly more likely to be satisfied with their level of involvement in the school (Torres-Burgo et al., 1999). Torres-Burgo et al. (1999) found no significant differences related to cultural sensitivity, and 90% of Hispanic parents and 95% of non-Hispanic parents felt the special education teacher was sensitive to their cultural background.

In Bailey's (1999) study, dissatisfaction with services was often related to language, being sent from one service to another, and feeling discriminated against. However, satisfaction rates varied based on parental characteristics. Parents with the lowest levels of education were the ones most likely to be dissatisfied, and many parents only knew about services from one provider (Bailey, 1999). One bright spot in these generally negative findings is that parents satisfied with services often mention one key person (e.g., a social worker) who helped navigate the system (Bailey, 1999).

**Professional collaboration.** Roache, Shore, Gouleta, and Butkevich (2003) collected quantitative and qualitative data from 125 school professionals in the Washington, DC area to determine their needs related to serving the population of culturally and linguistically diverse students with exceptionalities (CLDE). Four areas are addressed in the study: skills and academic training; knowledge of roles, responsibilities, and practices; training in collaboration; and support for collaboration (Roache et al., 2003). The findings are based on the first 25 surveys returned from members of each of five disciplines—general educators,

special education teachers, ESL teachers, speech pathologists, and counselors—in schools with more than 25 percent language-minority students (Roache et al., 2003).

The results suggest that these groups of professionals do not have adequate understanding of each other and do not have support to collaborate on behalf of CLDE students (Roache et al., 2003). About a quarter of respondents report they did not have the necessary training and skills about student backgrounds and language acquisition, making it difficult to deliver educational services to this population (Roache et al., 2003). In regards to the roles of other professionals, 62% of respondents did not know their roles and responsibilities, and comments in the open-ended questions confirmed the need to exchange information, materials, and other resources (Roache et al., 2003). Eighty-two percent of respondents did not have training on collaboration though many believed it to be important and necessary (Roache et al., 2003). Finally, 78% of participants report not receiving enough administrative support for collaborating with other professionals in serving CLDE students (Roache et al., 2003).

**Decision-making.** A three year grounded theory study, using ethnographic techniques, conducted by Klingner and Harry (2006) found much room for improvement in the special education referral and decision making process for ELLs. The researchers examined special education referrals and decision-making for ELLs, especially in child-study team (CST) meetings and placement conferences (Klingner & Harry, 2006). The researchers were interested in: how school personnel distinguished between reading struggles and learning disabilities; decision-makers understanding of second language acquisition and attention to language issues; the roles of team members and how decisions were made; and the interactions among professionals and parents (Klingner & Harry, 2006).



As part of a larger three year study, the researchers observed 21 referral and placement meetings for 19 students, across nine schools in an urban district in a southern state, where ELL students are overrepresented in special education (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Data was collected primarily through observation of meetings, and augmented with interviews with school personnel, including regional special education directors, principals, assistant principals, counselors, and “other key personnel,” and reviews of documents including IEP’s, psychological and other evaluations, test protocols, student work samples, district guidelines and policies, and data on special education placement in the district (Klingner & Harry, 2006).

The findings paint a picture of a far from ideal decision-making process, with much confusion about the differences between language acquisition and learning disabilities, overreliance on test scores, an absence of real collaboration, little attention to pre-referral strategies, and little respect for parents (Klingner & Harry, 2006). The psychologist played a dominant role, sometimes making decisions and convincing team members to support that decision in order to present a “united front” to the parents during the CST meetings essentially informing them of the decision, rather than involving them in the process (Klingner & Harry, 2006). The psychologist rarely saw the child prior to evaluation and little was done in terms of classroom observation, an essential element of understanding contextual elements of the child’s abilities and for better understanding the classroom ecology, which is potentially an important arena for pre-referral strategies (Klingner & Harry, 2006). A “pervasive negative attitude toward parents” left parents “marginalized and their input undervalued” and actually led to greater risk of placement in special education (Klingner & Harry, 2006, p. 2277).

In addition to recommendations about improving understanding of second language acquisition, Klingner and Harry (2006) suggest teachers should get guidance on how best to communicate and interact with parents and to diminish the role of the school psychologist by ensuring that team members are primarily general education teachers and parents. Clearly, specific classroom techniques and in-depth understanding of language acquisition should be left to educators, but scaling teams back to teachers and parents eliminates the positive aspects of having multi-disciplinary involvement in these decisions, and seems to be a reaction to the role of psychologists in this study. The authors do mention social workers as a possible participant in meetings, but do not discuss the role the social worker had in the meetings which may be indicative of a minor or non-existent role in these cases.

### **Negative Effects of Special Education Placement**

The creation of special education and the right of all children to a FAPE was a victory in 1975. Children with disabilities certainly benefit from the requirement that their unique education needs are met, and the requirement to consider meeting their long-term needs related to planning for post-secondary education and employment. However, there are still drawbacks of being placed in special education particularly if it is a misdiagnosed disability (as may be the case with disproportional representation).

Being given a disability diagnosis incurs a stigma which may affect both individuals and families, particularly in Latino ethnic groups (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). Psychosocial outcomes for special education students, particularly with LD or EBD (both high incidence disabilities), are dismal. Special education students are more likely to drop out of school (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb & Wishner, 1994; Kemp, 2006; Lipsky, 2005) and are more likely to be incarcerated (Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poiter, 2005).

Post school, they are less likely than non-special education students to be enrolled in postsecondary education, particularly if the student is non-White and less likely to be employed (Wagner, et al, 2006).

### **The Unintended Disproportional Representation Consequence**

According to the National Association of Bilingual Education, disproportionality is “when the percentage of any particular ethnic or racial group that receives special education is greater or less than the percentage of this group in the general school population” (2002, p. 9). Disproportional representation is not a new phenomenon, nor is it well understood. Though there are many possible explanations for it, neither the causes nor the remedies are clear. Most of the research has been on overrepresentation, meaning the presence of ELL students in special education at rates higher than in general education, though underrepresentation also occurs (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010).

When a child is diagnosed with a low incidence disability which is typically diagnosed by medical professionals, such as hearing or visual impairment, disproportionality does not exist (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Klingner & Artiles, 2003; Donovan & Cross, 2002). It is in the subjective diagnoses--primarily LD--that minority children are over or under represented, depending on the district (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Klingner & Artiles, 2003). Subjectivity of the referral and evaluation process means some children experiencing learning problems are not referred or identified late (Donovan & Cross, 2002). This is not necessarily caused by negative practices (e.g., discrimination) but could be caused by social factors (e.g., poverty), or even decisions intended to be helpful (e.g., identifying a child who does not have access to services except through special education).

**Historical perspective.** Disproportional representation of minority students has been a concern since the 1960's with much of the effort to understand and reduce disproportionality focused on the overrepresentation of African-American children (National Education Association, 2007). However, there is research that demonstrates disproportional representation existed long before it became a national concern. The overrepresentation of Latino children may have been over-diagnosed as "mentally handicapped" since the 1930s (Figueroa, 1999). In Washington, D.C., from 1955 to 1956, over 24 percent of newly admitted African American students were placed in separate special education classrooms, compared to three percent of white students (Connor & Ferri, 2005). During those years, over three-quarters of special education students were African American and special education classes doubled in enrollment (Connor & Ferri, 2005).

In 1979, the federal definition of which students could participate in bilingual education expanded from children with limited English speaking *ability* to children with limited English *proficiency*, because "often children are placed in special education programs when they should have been in a bilingual education program" (*Exceptional Children*, 1979, p. 160). In the 1980's, LEP special education students were described as "not served adequately in the schools" (Bernal, 1983, p. 424). Indeed speaking about referral, evaluation, and placement practices for urban children (with an emphasis on minority and low-SES status children), researchers Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, and Wishner, lament that not much has changed in 25 years (1994).

**Current data.** Unlike African-American children who have a long history of being overrepresented in special education, ELL's are both over and underrepresented in special education (e.g., Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004). Nationally, ELL's are *underrepresented*

(National Education Association, 2007). National data obscures the issue as district level data is much more complicated, and often demonstrates *overrepresentation*, particularly in certain disability categories (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). Though the data varies from district to district, Zehler et al. found a tendency towards overrepresentation in districts with more LEP students, and underrepresentation in districts with fewer ELL students (2003). Districts with 99 or fewer LEP students identified on average nearly sixteen percent of LEP students for special education services, and districts with 100 or more LEP students identified on average a little over nine percent of LEP students for special education (Zehler et al., 2003).

District level studies demonstrate mixed results, some showing patterns of overrepresentation and some showing underrepresentation. In a study conducted in urban areas in California, LEP students were overrepresented in special education, particularly older children (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). In a large southwestern school district researchers found ELL students were 12.1 percent of the total population, but comprised 22.3 percent of students in special education, including 35 percent of students with learning disabilities, and only 3.3 percent of children in the gifted program (De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006). In New York City schools, Conger, Schwartz, and Stiefel found that despite reporting equal or higher rates of disability, immigrant children were far less likely than native children to receive special education (2007). An analysis of country of birth found great differences in special education participation when poverty, LEP status, and other characteristics are held constant (Conger, Schwartz, & Stiefel, 2007).

The ratio of students eligible for special education services is not the whole picture, because students receive disproportional service once in special education. Compared to

White students, non-White students in special education are less likely to receive related services, which include social work services (Henderson, 2001). Researchers used disaggregated district level data to examine the number and type of disability labels, access to the least restrictive environment (LRE), and ancillary services for minority students, including LEP students (De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, and Park, 2006). Most students were found to have one disability label (87.8 percent), with non-ELL students averaging 1.03 labels, and ELL students averaging 1.04 labels (De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, and Park, 2006). Compared to non-ELLs, ELLs were overrepresented in the category of emotional disturbance (ED) and special education in general and underrepresented in developmental delays and placement in gifted education (De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, and Park, 2006). ELL students were more likely to be placed in segregated settings, compared to non-ELL students (De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, and Park, 2006).

**Causes of disproportionality.** If one thing is clear it is that the cause(s) of disproportional representation is not clear. The literature on the disproportionality of ELL children is quite limited (Klingner & Harry, 2003), but the literature on minorities in special education is much richer and some of it will be included in this discussion. Existing literature on how ELLs come to be over or under represented in the special education system is mostly from a special education perspective (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010) and is thus focused on educational practices, such as understanding language acquisition, and improving assessments and instruction. While there are many possible explanations for disproportionality, here the categories are collapsed into discrimination and bias, assessment and evaluation, socio-economic factors, and access to and availability of resources.

***Discrimination and bias.*** Researchers have repeatedly pointed to discrimination as an explanation for disproportional representation in special education, particularly to account for the overrepresentation of African-Americans in special education. After school integration, special education policies sometimes strengthened transposition, “the use of the legally accepted segregation of special education to maintain the effects of the unacceptable and illegal segregation by race” (Beratan, 2008). For example, historically, students in special education were categorized as mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, slow learners, or culturally deprived (Sleeter, 1986). The civil rights movement in the 1960’s prompted the elimination of the slow learner and culturally deprived categories, raised the IQ threshold for the mental retardation category, and eliminated a child’s background as a criterion for diagnosis (Sleeter, 1986). Sleeter argues that when these categories were eliminated, minority students once identified as “culturally deprived” or “mentally retarded” were reclassified under a new category: learning disabled (1986).

Individual bias by teachers and researchers has also been blamed for disproportional representation. Research has demonstrated bias among teachers in using assessment tools (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Mehan, Hertweck & Miehls, 1986) and psychologists (Macmillan, Gresham & Bocian, 1998). There have been many studies demonstrating racial bias among individual decision-makers, but prominent researchers on disproportionality declare that blaming racist individuals or biased systems is "simplistic" (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010, p. 286). Some studies have also contradicted these earlier findings (e.g., Jussim, Eccles & Madon, 1996).

In addition to institutional racism, Beratan argues that institutional *ablism* contributes to disproportionality of minorities in special education (2008). Institutional ablism is “the

collective failure of an organization (*sic*) to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their disability” (p. 339). Removing physical barriers, as required by the ADA, are the most obvious and easiest part of overcoming institutional ablism. This type of discrimination is embedded in the structure of schools in processes and behaviors such as pedagogy, management practices, funding, and teacher education (Beratan, 2008).

***Assessment and evaluation.*** Much of the research available on this population is focused on assessment and evaluation, including bias and language acquisition. However, this section will only include a few highlights as this literature is very specific to education. Assessment from a psychological perspective, which is more closely associated with social work, will also be discussed.

School personnel often have a difficult time sorting out the differences between learning disabilities and language acquisition (e.g., Klingner & Harry, 2006). Assessments, particularly IQ tests, have been challenged as culturally biased. Particularly relevant for ELL students is the finding that certain assessments not only led to greater intelligence/achievement discrepancies (leading to special education placement) among Latinos compared to others, but more severe discrepancies between Latinos who were ELLs, and Latinos who were English proficient (Palmer, Olivarez, Wilson & Fordyce, 1989).

Research demonstrates that decision-making often lies with just one person, usually the psychologist who is responsible for formal evaluations (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Psychologists, who bear the brunt of special education evaluations, are somewhat quiet on the issue; the limited literature in this profession also focuses primarily on language difficulties, with some attention given to issues of acculturation, and behavioral observation (e.g., Schon, Shaftel, & Markham, 2008). A study of reports in a school district in California



found that psychologists are not assessing bilingual children using existing legal and professional nondiscriminatory guidelines (Figueroa & Newsome, 2006).

***Socio-economic factors.*** Some researchers believe the biological and social effects of poverty, which ELLs experience at higher rates than non-ELLs, may indeed explain the higher incidence of disability (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb & Wishner, 1994). Responding to a rhetorical question about contextual contributors to early development that might lead to higher incidence of special needs among minorities, authors of the National Academy of Sciences report responds with:

...a definitive “yes.” We know that minority children are disproportionately poor, and poverty is associated with higher rates of exposure to harmful toxins, including lead, alcohol, and tobacco, in early stages of development. Poor children are also more likely to be born with low birth weight, to have poorer nutrition, and to have home and child care environments that are less supportive of early cognitive and emotional development than their majority counterparts. When poverty is deep and persistent, the number of risk factors rises, seriously jeopardizing development. (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 4)

This is countered by the argument that while poverty is just one of many complex indicators and we must address related factors such as barriers to work and safe housing, policy implementation, and school quality (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010, p. 283). The negative physical effects of poverty also do not explain why ELLs are only disproportionately represented in subjective disability categories, not objective categories such as visual impairment.

*Access to and availability of resources.* The resource categories of possible causes of disproportional representation include educational resources, cultural resources, and school resources. Educational resources are instruction-focused and include concepts such as class size and teacher ability. Cultural resources are things ELLs need because they are ELLs, such as language services. Social resources are school-wide, non-instructional needs, such as funding for services.

When inadequate educational resources are available, struggling children will not have the support they need to learn. Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, and Wishner found teachers have concern about class size and believe their students could function better in smaller classes (1994). The researchers found many children did not meet the definition of LD, but were low-achieving and low-ability and the teachers are unable to accommodate them (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb & Wishner, 1994). Prominent disproportionality researchers assert that diagnosing children with a disability may be used in place of providing high-quality general education (Harry & Klingner, 2007).

Cultural resources are resources required for ELLs, both tangible (e.g., translated materials) or intangible (e.g., cultural awareness among school personnel). One study found inadequate numbers of interpreters and bilingual staff, and communication barriers as factors contributing to disproportionality (Hardin, 2009). Conger, Schwartz and Stiefel (2007) speculate that “language, cultural, or institutional barriers to parents’ ability or willingness to obtain special education services for their children” could explain the differences in special education placement (p. 426). A study with early childhood administrators and teachers found problems with determining home language and English proficiency and using instruments for screening and evaluation, and a need for reliable and valid tools in various languages,

interpreters trained in the jargon of early intervention, and more training for teachers to meet the needs of CLD children (Hardin, Roach-Scott, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2007).

Social resources are resources that fill a purpose beyond instructional need. When social resources are not available, school personnel may believe special education is the best place for a special needs (not necessarily disabled) student. For example, Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb and Wishner (1994) found that professionals knowingly ignored disability definitions "marshal scant resources for low-achieving students" (p. 459) because few resources were available outside of special education. Psychologists may misdiagnose a child as LD to protect them from the more stigmatizing label of emotional/behavioral disorders (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

A more hidden form of obtaining social resources is maintaining the status quo in order to receive funding for services. For example, moving away from the special education model may create a problem for social work positions in schools, as many school social workers are paid with federal special education funding (Huxtable, 1997). Beratan speculates that because IDEA triggers maximum funding to address disproportional representation when it is a significant problem, LEA's receive an incentive for having higher rates of disproportionality (2008). This "bounty" funding has been linked to greater growth in special education, compared to lump sum funding (Greene & Forster, in Beratan).

### **Social Work**

There are over 15,000 school social workers in the United States, and it is estimated that 50% or more of them work with children in special education (Streeck, personal communication, December 14, 2009). As the number of immigrants continues to grow and they continue to disperse to new areas (Capps, Fix, & Passel, 2002; Capps & Fortuny, 2006) it

is likely that more and more social workers will find themselves practicing with children who are ELL. Social workers are largely absent from the research on ELLs in special education, but they are uniquely situated to play a part in the pre-referral, evaluation, and placement decisions.

### **Values base of profession**

The social work Code of Ethics contains a mission and values which implicitly supports the role of social work in improving conditions for ELLs entering special education. Social workers are expected to have knowledge and recognize strengths in different cultures, and understand the nature of diversity and oppression related to "race, ethnicity, national origin...[and] immigration status" (1.05). In addition to *understanding* historical and contemporary issues associated with these characteristics, social workers are expected to *act* to prevent and eliminate discrimination. Given the problems facing immigrants and the growing immigrant population whom many social workers will come into contact with in some capacity, Engstrom and Okamura (2007) call for a social work specialization in immigrant well-being.

Social workers are expected to have a particular focus on improving wellbeing and meeting the needs of the vulnerable, the oppressed, and those living in poverty (NASW, 2008)--three conditions children who are ELL often experience. This population is vulnerable because of their age, immigration status (including immigration status of family members), and because they are facing a potential disability label. Social justice, a primary value of the social work profession, includes justice for those experiencing discrimination (NASW, 2008). Discrimination is a possible explanation for disproportional representation, and a possible experience of a child in special education or who is an ELL.

## **Role of social work**

While social workers role may vary in each LEA, they generally hold a unique position at the crossroads of family, school, and community. While federal legislation speaks to general tasks of social work, e.g., "preparing a social or developmental history" (IDEA, 2004), the values and education of social work require that this history be evaluated with regard to cultural and socioeconomic factors (Raines, 2006). In addition to the specific services delineated in IDEA (2004), social workers can provide cultural competence workshops and encourage collaboration with community and professional groups (Raines, 2006). Though largely focused on instruction and other education specific interventions, Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb & Wishner (1994) suggest community based interventions, including social services, might be necessary to alleviate unnecessarily placing children in special education (p. 465).

Social workers have unique skills and ethical obligations to meet the needs of immigrants, and, by extension, ELLs (Engstrom & Okamura, 2007). ELLs are likely to experience a wide variety of challenges. Some challenges, such as language acquisition, are most appropriately addressed from an education standpoint. However, many characteristics and problems facing ELLs are social, cultural, psychological, and community related, and are within the purview of the school social worker (e.g., Dupper, 1993). For example, families experiencing differential acculturation may require clinical interventions (Tapia, Schwartz, Prado, Lopez, Pantin, 2006) which can be provided by social workers. Families who qualify for public benefits, but who are not receiving them (Reardon-Anderson et al, 2002) may benefit from social work case management.

## **Existing Research**

Social workers are not conducting research on the ELL population entering special education, nor are they included in the literature from other professions. In an extensive review of research published in the last 40 years on overrepresentation of minority children in special education (underrepresentation, the other side of disproportional representation, was not included), Waitoller, Artiles, and Cheney (2010) found most of the research has been published in special education journals and call for research from other disciplines. A few existing studies mention social workers in passing. Klingner and Harry, for example, found that the parents and the social worker are the least influential members of special education placement meetings (2006). Bailey found that parents satisfied with special education services often mention one key person, such as a social worker, who helped navigate the system (1999).

In conducting the literature review for this chapter I used a combination of special education and ELL related keywords to search for social work related articles. The following keyword combinations were used: limited English proficiency and social work; LEP and social work; English as a second language and social work; ESL and social work; English language learner and social work; ELL and social work; culturally and linguistically diverse and social work; cld and social work; bilingual and social work; immigrant, social work and education; immigrant, social work, and school; immigrant, social work, and special education; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and social work; IDEA and social work; cultural competence, social work, and disability; cultural competence, social work, and special education; cultural diversity, social work, and special education; cultural diversity, social work, and disability; disproportionality and social work; disproportional representation and

social work; overrepresentation and social work; and social work, minority, and special education. The databases searched were Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, and Social Work Abstracts.

### **Empowerment Approach**

Educators have contributed most of the research on the ELL-SpED population to the existing literature. The research has therefore been primarily (and appropriately) focused on elements of their profession: linguistically and culturally appropriate assessments; language acquisition; and instructional methods. Some attention has also been paid to collaboration with families and cultural awareness. A social work perspective brings these elements together, and can act as a link between family and school, community resources, and the broader society.

This population sits at a theoretical crossroads somewhere between social work with immigrants and social work with people with disabilities. That crossroads is manifest in disproportionate representation. Dozens of perspectives, models, and theories have been used to explain, predict, and effect disproportionate minority placement in special education, tending towards the very broad (including all minorities) or specific to a particular minority group (usually African-Americans), but rarely does it address the unique needs of the ELL population.

The empowerment approach is centered on joining with the client and shifting power, which may seem incompatible with grounded theory research because it is observational, not action-oriented. Lee notes that research can be a “tool for empowerment” by supporting and documenting a problem so clients and others can better advocate for change (2001). While this research may do little or nothing to immediately affect outcomes for ELL children being

considered for special education placement, the findings may contribute to change in the long term. Further, while empowerment has roots in critical and radical theories, current practitioners seek to help clients “overcome social barriers to self-fulfillment within existing social structures” (Payne, 2005). Working within existing structures—challenging them, of course, but pushing for incremental improvements rather than radical change—means small changes are not only acceptable but expected when using an empowerment approach, and is firmly anchored in a positivist paradigm. Finally, empowerment is both a *goal* and a *process*, and research on a scarcely researched population is part of the process towards empowering the individuals in the group (Mullaly, 2007).

Characteristics of the empowerment approach make it well matched to research on ELL children facing the possibility of a special education placement. The approach emerges from work with ethnic minorities, though not immigrants in particular, stemming from the civil rights movement in the 1960’s (Lee, 2001; Mullaly, 2007). This foundation of working with minority communities is readily translated to working with minority immigrant communities, in that they both are likely to experience discrimination and difficulty accessing power.

A key element of empowerment is the use of “multifocal” vision which includes: a historic perspective of oppression; an ecological view; ethclass, feminist, cultural and critical perspectives; a multicultural perspective; and a global perspective (Lee, 2001). The multifocal lenses can lead to a rich understanding of a family and their experiences in the school, community, country, and even the world. This approach requires the social worker to come to the table with a certain amount of knowledge, e.g., the history of oppression, and blend it with the family’s experiences to create an opportunity for structural change.



The focus of the empowerment approach is on clients, in this case, families of children ELLs, but they are not the only group of people struggling with power. Due to feasibility issues, families were not included in this research. However, though the professionals and paraprofessionals involved in the special education decision-making process might be perceived as power-holders, they may not wield that power or even perceive themselves as powerful. Extending the empowerment approach beyond a traditional view of “client” is not completely without precedent. Mullaly (2007) argues that social workers, disproportionately women, are a group that has experienced “occupational subordination” and therefore provides an impetus for using the empowerment approach.

Though multifocal vision points to oppression in minority groups and social workers interest in social justice points to primary concern about the children ELLs and their families, it does not negate our responsibility to address power domination wherever it is. We may imagine a hierarchy of power distribution with (perhaps) a psychologist at the top, scattered teachers and others in the middle, and social workers and parents near the bottom and we should concern ourselves most with that bottom rung—but that doesn’t mean ignoring the rest of the players. Of course, only an exploration of the actual situation will reveal the power distribution (i.e., do not assume that the psychologist has all—or any—of the power). Even the most powerful person in the room may be controlled by oppressive funding or policy considerations, an absent power-player (e.g., a superintendent), or other factors that lead to feelings of diminished power. In other words, the actual power may be in the hands of another person or group.

This research only explored one facet of this complicated web of power--the social workers. The topic of this study, ELLs entering special education (a social work perspective),

ultimately sought to examine power distribution (i.e., how are decisions being made?) while recognizing that it is not just the person who signs a paper or completes an evaluation or any other single event. The children do not enter special education in one moment in time, but rather in a series of decisions and events and collaborations set amidst a complex set of regulations.

Power was not be explored as a static concept, but as one that can shift not just over time but over types of events. For example, whoever is in charge of scheduling a meeting can effectively take power from a parent by scheduling that meeting while the parent is known to be working; but the scheduler might have no power during the meeting. There may also be issues that do not clearly point to some person controlling the power, and point instead to an entity (e.g., Congress making federal regulations) or some amalgamation of events. Power is also subject to differences of perception, leading some decision-makers to feel more or less powerful than others experience.

### **Conclusion**

The literature on ELL children in special education is nearly non-existent, and what is available is primarily from the profession of special education. Based on disproportionality rates we know some children end up in special education without a disability, and some stay in regular education when they might benefit from special education. Families are not well served in the system; they are often unhappy with their involvement and they are not engaged and included in decision-making. The literature indicates that professionals are not always well prepared to meet the needs of ELL students and their families, and may not be prepared for or supported in collaborative efforts.

Most of the research on ELL children entering or receiving special education services mentions social and cultural issues. However, the special education perspective from which most of the literature is written focuses (appropriately) on education-related activities: assessment, language acquisition, instruction. A portion of the literature, from an education perspective, is concerned with engaging families or professional collaboration. While educators clearly belong in discussions about and have their own approaches to engaging families, cultural awareness, and social problems, these are not the central elements of their professions as they are to social workers. In other words, social workers are missing an opportunity (shirking their responsibility perhaps?) by not studying this population.

There are many research opportunities for social workers interested in the ELL population entering special education. The gaps in the literature are wide. Social workers can examine professional roles, cultural awareness and attitudes. We can talk to families for and get beyond understanding their level of satisfaction with services. At the macro level, policies, funding distribution, and social characteristics need to be investigated further.

Because the field of research is wide open, it seemed most appropriate to use a classical grounded theory (CGT) to identify the core elements of this research area. By using a CGT, a problem is identified and core concepts generated. A theory of ELLs entering special education, from the social work perspective, that was developed may be used as the groundwork in further studies.

This research was conducted using grounded theory which means, in part, that it was not guided by an underlying theory; it was, however, based on an empowerment approach. Practitioners using an empowerment approach seek to form community with clients so together they can begin to understand who has power; who does not have power; and how the

power can be shifted or shared (Lee, 2001). Most adherents to this approach would probably not use the term “powerless” to describe groups of clients, as all people are considered to have some power but may not be able to access or use it (Mullaly, 2007). [This approach should not be confused with empowerment used as a political term to suggest people can be “empowered” to do things themselves and should no longer need government assistance (Mullaly, 2007).]

Consistent with a CGT design, this study began with a research *area*, not a research question (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). The research area for this study was *ELLs entering special education*. "Entering" meant the pre-referral, referral, and identification (placement) activities, processes, decisions, and experiences. Despite the myriad of problems reported in this literature review, when conducting a CGT the problem is not predefined, rather it emerges during the research (Glaser, 1978). Hypotheses, too, are generated during analysis of data, not before (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As discussed more in the next chapter, a dissertation is by necessity a compromised CGT project as adhering strictly to the design is nearly impossible (Glaser, 1998).

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The research area, *ELLs entering special education*, was examined from the social work perspective using classic grounded theory (CGT). A CGT is the "discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2). The study was qualitative and situated in a functionalist paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The objective of the study was to "discover" a substantive theory on ELLs entering special education, from the perspective of one involved group (social workers), including the key concept and theoretical connections. Prior to data collection, no hypotheses are developed for a CGT (Glaser, 1998).

The methodological decisions followed the Glaser style CGT (e.g., Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1998) and included many of the recommendations and methods in *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participants were 11 school social workers in Virginia, drawn from public lists and known from prior ethnography. Interviews were semi-structured, based on six dimensions: needs of ELLs; engaging families of ELLs; professional setting; community connections; special education process; social work. The data gathered from the interviews were analyzed using constant comparison, beginning after the first interview and incorporating new data after each subsequent interview. Memos were written throughout the process, and were analyzed as data along with the coded interviews.

#### **Dimensions of the Study**

As Glaser and Strauss (1967) note multiple times, the researcher is to remain as open as possible to all data, discarding--or avoiding--preconceived notions of the problem. Qualitative data gathering should be as open-ended as possible during a CGT in order to

assure the results are grounded in the data, not based on pre-existing concepts or theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1998). The need for completely open-ended interviews makes it difficult to preconceive specific questions to be asked during the interview. However, in order to assure that human subjects protection could be assessed by reviewers and maintained by the researcher, boundaries and limitations were set on the scope of the interviews.

The following six dimensions of ELLs entering special education are based on the literature review and prior ethnography. They were purposefully broad to allow problem and theory emergence within the dimensions.

1. Needs of ELLs. This dimension includes individual and systems level needs of ELLs, such as acculturative stress and high poverty levels. Policies, available resources, and knowledge of the needs of ELLs are also included in this dimension.
2. Engaging families of ELLs. Engaging families is the process of involving family in decision-making about their child, but also keeping them engaged and updated about their child's school-related needs. Tangible services, such as translation and interpretation services, as well as intangible processes, such as cultural awareness, are explored under this dimension.
3. Professional setting. The professional setting is the school and community context of social workers engaging with ELL students. This includes things like professional collaboration, administrative policies, and access to training.
4. Community connections. This dimension examines the connections between schools and families and services in the community. Availability, access, and appropriateness (cultural competence? language?) are considered.

5. Special education process. This dimension addresses the pre-referral, referral, placement processes of a child entering special education and the associated policies and practices.
6. Social work. The roles, values, and knowledge of professional social workers are included in this dimension. This includes both what social workers expect of themselves and what is expected of them according to policy, rules, and experiences.

The lines of inquiry were narrowed as the problem and core variable emerged, and the theory is related mostly to the first (needs of ELLs), third (professional setting), and fourth (community connections) dimensions.

### **Justification for CGT**

A classic grounded research (CGR) study was the best approach for this area because there was little data available. As noted in the last chapter, a thorough search of the social work literature found no research on ELLs entering special education and research from other professions, mostly special education, is limited (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). A CGT can be undertaken to study a well-studied phenomena based on the presumption that some of what is "known" has not been discovered in a systematic way leaving room for the grounded theorist "quite enough space for new work" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 10). However, in social-psychological areas that are untouched, grounded theory research can make a significant contribution to the field providing a conceptual and theoretical jumping off point for other researchers and a deeper understanding for people affected by the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser 1978). This study was a mix of known and unknown. Although there is some information from an education perspective, the social work perspective on ELLs entering special education was completely unknown.

## **Paradigm**

CGT falls within the functionalist paradigm, one of the four paradigms described by Burrell and Morgan (1979). The functionalist paradigm assumes a realist ontology, a deterministic human nature, a positivist epistemology, and is nomothetic. It is not that straightforward, of course, as elements of grounded theory are situated on the edges of some of these assumptions. CGT is realist and deterministic, assumes a modified (or perhaps deeper) positivist epistemology, and is nomothetic to some extent.

A realist ontology is one in which the social world has structure that exists apart from individuals perception of it or the labels we give it. CGT is built on a realistic ontological assumption. The method is designed to discover the core variable and related concepts—the core variable is already “out there” waiting for a researcher to find it; label it; and describe the relationships.

In the functionalist paradigm, human actions are determined by their environment. this is called determinism. When applying a CGT to a research area there is an assumption of determinism. Humans are operating in a real social world with rules that may be unknown to the actors. The researcher discovers these existing rules; describes the concepts and their relationships (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); but does not affect them. Glaser (1998) talks at length about the “laymen” who understand how to do what they need to do, but do not understand how it all fits together conceptually—that is up to the researcher to discover and piece together.

Positivist epistemologists assert that the social world can be explained and predicted by developing and testing hypothesis that examine patterns and relationships. While classic grounded theorists would not oppose developing and testing hypothesis, they take a step back



*before* the hypothesis arguing that the hypothesis should develop from grounded data, not assumptions about how the social world works (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Positivists who develop hypothesis or test hypothesis based on non-grounded theories are roundly criticized by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and the frequency in which this was happening provided the impetus for developing grounded theory. Glaser (1998) supports hypothesis testing, but specifically warns against starting and ending with that activity. Using CGT is consistent with positivist epistemological assumptions as the *first step* and one that should not be skipped in a rush to test hypotheses.

A nomothetic approach is “law like,” wherein researchers search for the universal laws to explain and predict the social world. This is the assumption that is the least consistent with CGT, though a nomothetic explanation is the goal of the research. While conducting analysis the researcher is to keep in mind generalizability, not a description of the individual case as in an idiographic explanation. The results are nomothetic in the sense that they represent something real in the social world and that the deterministic nature of human beings means they will likely perceive them as “law.” However, Glaser and Strauss (1967) assert that “even the most accurate facts” change (p. 23). In a CGT it is the *conceptual category* that is expected to hold fast, not the evidence supporting them or the concepts themselves which may also “have their meanings re-specified” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 23). Even the final product—a paper or book, for example—is expected to be changed up until the moment of publication and is not supposed to give the impression that it is “the last word” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 40).

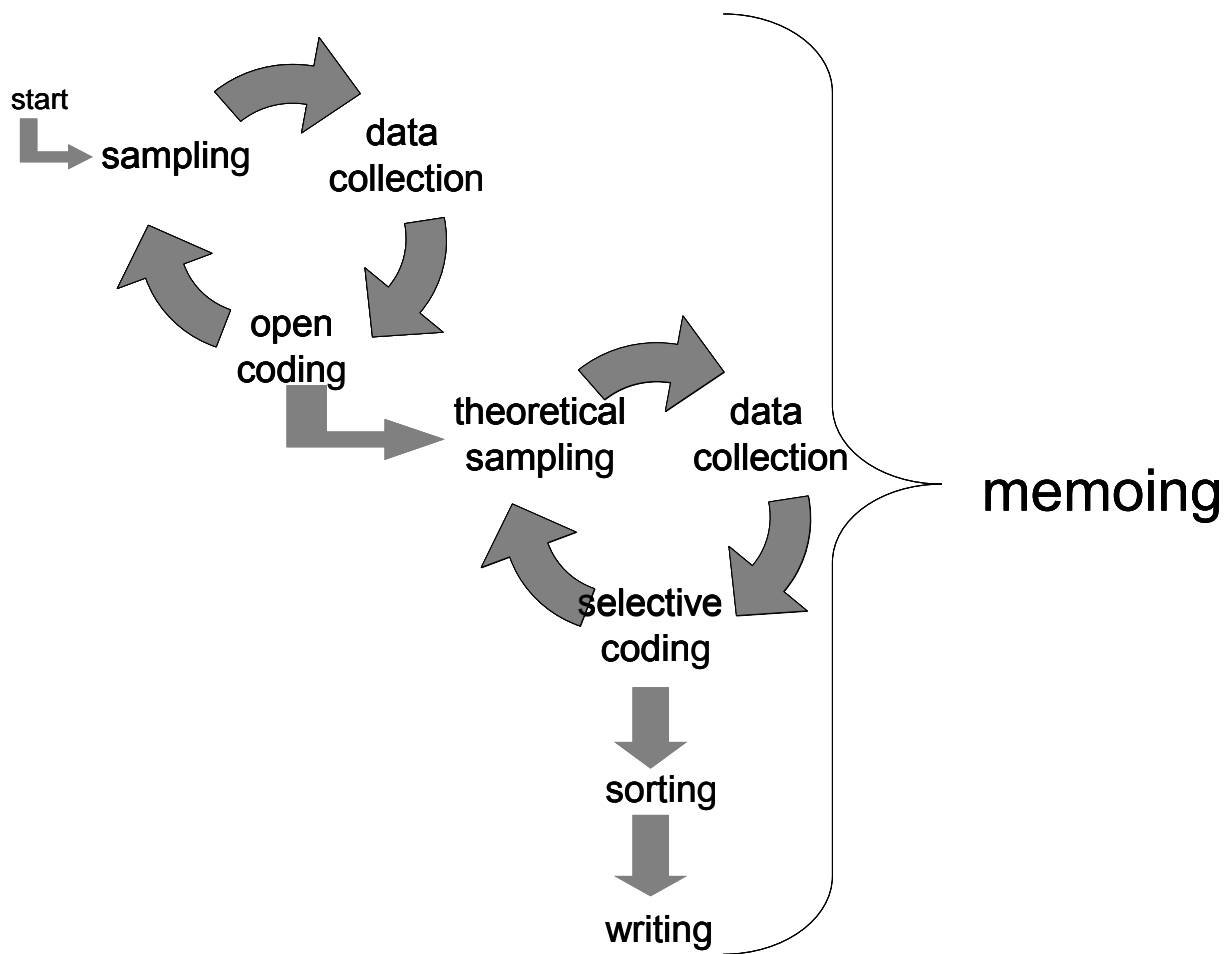


Figure 1: The Classic Grounded Theory Process

### Grounded Theory Research Design

Data for a CGT is collected using theoretical sampling, in which data is collected, coded, and analyzed before deciding "what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). It is not a directed series of steps, "it is both directed by the emerging theory and it directs its further emergence (Glaser, 1998, p. 157) in a series of "double-back" steps (1978, p. 16).

Theoretical sampling involves four general steps: sampling, data collection, coding, and memoing (Figure 1). A CGT begins with sampling, data collection, and open coding. Memos are constantly written describing researcher observations mostly about concepts and their relationships. Once codes are established and a core variable is identified, the procedures become more precise by using theoretical sampling, streamlined data collection (in which only relevant information is recorded), and selective coding. The mostly simultaneous actions data collection, coding and memoing are called constant comparison (Glaser, 1998). After data collection ends, the final data is coded, and then coding ends. Memoing continues even through the sorting and writing processes, which is when the theory is most fully developed. Each of these actions is described in more detail in the following sections.

The important point here is that the analysis is *ongoing* during the CGT process. Unlike many research designs that separate data collection from data analysis, Glaser (1998) recommends constantly analyzing the data. This means the data are not only analyzed while it is being coded or even made into expanded field notes, they are analyzed even *during* an interview. This allows the researcher to make decisions about which data to collect, or which notes to take, particularly later in the research process (Glaser, 1998). Once a core variable is discovered and concepts related to the variable are found, data collection becomes faster and more specific so that during an interview only data related to the core variable and related concepts are captured (Glaser, 1998).

Emergence and generalizability are the key principles when conducting a CGT. Entering data collection without a preconceived framework, problem definition, or concepts, allows the information to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparison process forces discovery of a problem, key concepts, and a core variable (Glaser,

1998). The underlying analytic principle in this study is to develop *generalizable* theory. In a CGT the data are analyzed for commonalities that support and expand on core concepts which are usually identified fairly early in the analysis. From analysis to writing the results, the researcher emphasizes these commonalities, not provides rich personal descriptions (Glaser, 1998).

The findings are nomothetic, drawn from common data points, not about individual stories or "meaning-making." In this study, participants told emotional stories of refugee children educated in camps, students who were third generation Americans struggling with English, and mothers in polygamous families who were caring for the biological children of her husband's other wives. In this research, these stories are not important on their own—their value is their contribution to the theory of support for ELLs where there is a disconnect between needs and resources.

### **Sampling**

Ideally, in a CGT sampling begins the study and is subsequently driven by the developing theory. It is more than just an explanation of where participants are drawn from, after the first interview or two, it is a process used to focus the data on the emerging core variables (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 45-47; Glaser, 1998, p. 158). This study focused on one group, social workers in Virginia, which is contrary to the recommendations of CGT to allow groups to emerge during the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 47-49). Choosing one professional group for this study was appropriate to the knowledge gap, which is the lack of information about ELLs entering special education from any profession other than education. It was also a feasible choice due to difficulties accessing school systems. Including social

workers from one state was also feasible, and a reasonable first step for CGT in a research area where nothing is known.

### **Sample characteristics**

The sample for this study consisted of 11 social workers. The sample was limited to current school social workers in recognition of the temporal quality of CGT (i.e., someone who was a social worker a year ago is not aware of current conditions in the school). Only social workers who held a BSW or MSW from a college or university with a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited social work program were eligible for participation. Holding an accredited social work degree was necessary to ensure that the participants had exposure to the same professional values and ethics, and knowledge base.

The 11 participants were from seven cities and counties in various geographic regions of the state, including Northern, Eastern and Central Virginia. The school divisions were located in Regions 2, 4, and 5. The counties and cities were diverse in terms of the numbers of English language learners and languages spoken. For those counties, the percentage of languages other than English spoken at home for people ages 5 and over ranged from 7.3 to around 35.9 and the percentage of foreign born residents ranged from 4.6 to 28.8 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). According to participants, the number of languages spoken other than English in that school division varied from a few to over 100.

All the participants were female, despite trying to recruit for maximum variation. Two males agreed to participate, one signed a consent, but neither followed through with scheduling an interview. One participant was foreign-born, one was a second generation American, and the rest were either born in the United States and spoke English as a first language or did not disclose their birth or first language.

## **Recruitment procedures**

Participants were recruited via email, in person, and by phone. Social workers were primarily recruited via email using an approved letter (Appendix A) and flyer (Appendix B). For in-person or phone recruitment, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved recruitment script was used (Appendix C). This included social workers known to be interested in participating through prior ethnography, social workers who contact me about participating, and social workers at conferences who expressed an interest in the research.

Once a social worker expressed interest in the study, either by e-mail, telephone, or in person, she was read the recruitment script in person or on the phone. The recruitment script included basic information about the study and two qualifying questions: (1) Are you currently a school social worker in Virginia? and (2) Do you hold a social work degree from a CSWE accredited college or university? If the answer to either was no, the person would have been excluded from the study; no interested participants were excluded.

Initially, participants were sought using four approved approaches, but difficulty in recruitment prompted a modification to the IRB approved proposal. First, social workers who were key informants in the prior ethnography were recruited. This group of social workers from three different Virginia school districts had all expressed interest in being involved in this study. Two of the six members of this group participated in interviews. Second, members of the Virginia Association of Visiting Teachers/School Social Workers (VAVTSSW) were contacted. VAVTSSW maintains a publicly available member list which includes the members' credentials. Only members listed as social workers or school social workers in the "endorsement" section of the list were contacted for recruitment, via e-mail. This group was sent an initial email and a follow-up one month later. This approach yielded three participants.

Third, I attended two Virginia social work conferences and attempted to recruit participants face-to-face. The face-to-face approach produced no participants, despite expressed interest. Finally, participants were asked to distribute the flyer (Appendix B) to other school social workers who might be interested in participating. This produced no new participants. The originally approved plan produced five participants.

There is no central location to find contact information for school social workers, however, the information is sometimes available on school websites and some is available on the Virginia Department of Education website. In March 2011, a modification to the recruitment plan was submitted to the IRB and approved. The new plan allowed school social workers to be contacted using publicly available email addresses found on Virginia school division or school websites. The list of Virginia school divisions is available on the Virginia Department of Education website listed by the eight state regions, and further divided into “county” and “cities and towns” categories. Every fourth division was chosen in each region, beginning with schools listed by county, followed by schools listed by city or town. The division website was checked for school social worker email addresses. When school social workers email addresses were not available at the division level, school websites were checked for the addresses. If the individual school sites did not have email addresses, the fourth next division website was reviewed using the same procedures. School social workers with available email addresses were sent a recruitment letter #3 (Appendix A) with the recruitment flyer (Appendix B) attached. Five participants were found using this method, for a total of 11 participants.

## **Sampling ethics**

Ethical considerations are discussed in more detail later in the chapter, but following is a brief discussion of ethics during sampling. First, there is an overview of theoretical sampling and why it was not be used in this study. Second, there is a description of the informed consent process for this study.

Theoretical sampling is the preferred sampling method for a CGT but it is not consistent with ethics related to human subjects protections. In theoretical sampling, the researcher determines who or what groups to sample based on emergence using the most recent results of constant comparison, not on any preconceived idea about who may best contribute data to the research area (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). This approach potentially violates the privacy of individuals, as they would be contacted based on my evolving theoretical assumptions about what they could contribute to the theory. Rather than distributing information about the study and asking interested participants to contact me, I would identify a need (e.g., someone to talk about concept A) and reach out to that person who previously was unaware of the study; thus, potentially invading their privacy.

Theoretical sampling was not completely ignored, however. I noted groups that could be included in more fully developing this theory and will consider those groups as potential participants in future research. I sought social workers to fill out the theory by asking initial participants to share recruitment materials with other social workers who had differing opinions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I asked participants to share the recruitment information with colleagues who might know more about the core variable or concepts of interest (Glaser, 1998). This is similar to snowball sampling, but with a broad request for participants at the beginning and a narrow request for more participants as the research progressed.



If after hearing or reading the recruitment script, the potential participant was interested in participating, she was given an informed consent document to review and sign (Appendix D). The informed consent contained information about the study in easy to understand terms, including a description of the study, the risks and benefits, procedures, confidentiality, and information about how to end participation in the study. If the interview was not conducted face-to-face, this document was mailed and returned prior to the telephone interview.

### **Theoretical saturation**

I proposed that sampling would stop if theoretical saturation occurred, or when 35 participants had been interviewed, whichever was first. Theoretical saturation is when "no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61). During a CGT, the researcher generally seeks different groups to "stretch diversity of data" to reach saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 62). Since this study is based solely on one group--social workers--diverse individuals from the group were sought to expand on the concepts. Participants were asked to share the information about the study with any school social worker, particularly those social workers known to have a different perspective or opinion to ensure diversity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Once the core variable had been identified sampling was narrowed and I sought participants who could contribute data on those concepts. When concepts from different participants become repetitive, saturation was reached, and recruitment ended. With eleven participants I was able to identify the core category and problem, wherein the information became repetitive so saturation was declared. However, I do believe a larger sample might have contributed to a deeper understanding of the categories that have been produced in this project.

## **Data Collection**

Data came from interviews with school social workers. When feasible, interviews were conducted face-to-face, and some by telephone using the approved interview protocol (Appendix E). Follow-ups to expand the data and comment on the findings were conducted by phone. Initial interviews lasted 1 to 1½ hours and were as open-ended as possible, within the key dimensions of inquiry. Eleven interviews were conducted as part of initial data gathering. Three follow-up interviews, lasting about 30 minutes each, were conducted with three participants.

The primary 11 interviews were semi-structured using the six dimensions as guides. For example, an interview opened with a question such as, "can you tell me about engaging families of ELL children?" After the initial 11 interviews, three follow up interviews were conducted. These interviews were narrower in scope, as the core concept (supporting ELLs) had been identified (see discussion of how participants were chosen in the "member checking" section below).

### **Mechanics of Data Collection**

There were two steps to data collection, field notes and expanded notes, while simultaneously conducting ongoing analysis. The first step were field notes, in this case notes that were taken while conducting interviews. This is a condensed version of what was said and what happens during the interview and was used as a reminder when expanding the notes after leaving the field (Spradley, 1980). While recording field notes, Spradley (1980) describes the need to identify the language used as the researcher's interpretation of what is being said or as the participant's verbatim language while taking field notes. To the extent

possible, field notes were verbatim, when possible, and minimally interpreted notes so the data could be open coded.

The second step was writing expanded notes based on the field notes done as soon after the interview as possible, in keeping with the recommendation that expanded notes should be made as soon as possible after the field notes were taken (Spradley, 1980). The field notes were used as reminders of events and the conversation and were filled out with as many details as possible in the expanded notes. Consistent with both Spradley (1980) and Glaser (1978), when repetition occurs during interviews (either by the same participant or by different participants) it was recorded each time, as repetition is one way in which social processes are discovered (Spradley 1980).

Field notes were handwritten for face-to-face interviews and made directly into a word processing program for phone interviews. Expanded notes were made in a word processing program. Glaser particularly recommends against taping interviews, which would then need to be transcribed or at least listened to, as this slows down the process and contains more information than needed (1998, pp. 107-111). Taping, or even detailed note taking, is contrary to the "economic and efficient" method of jotting notes related to the core category (Glaser, 1998, p. 108).

## **Software**

The qualitative software package Atlas.ti was used as a tool to record and sort data and Microsoft Word was used to record field notes and memos. CGT requires producing and sorting a large amount of qualitative data, including notes from interviews, codes, and memos, as well as possibly drawing on other data sources such as documents, pictures, maps, sound files, and video. This study required flexibility, the ability to toggle rapidly between codes and

memos, and an easy way for a researcher to sort information (Glaser, 1978, p. 71). Atlas.ti is designed to store these various types of data and allows easy recoding, memoing, and sorting (though much of the sorting was done with printed material; see “sorting” below). Field notes were be made by hand, but expanded notes were made in Microsoft Word and uploaded to Atlas.ti. This software offered a convenient place to analyze data, but it is not designed to conduct analysis or make theoretical decisions—only I did that.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Coding**

Two types of codes are used during a CGT process: substantive codes and theoretical codes. Substantive codes are used to pare down empirical data into conceptual bites of information into categories (Glaser, 1978, p. 55). Theoretical codes are used to develop hypotheses by relating the substantive codes to each other (Glaser, 1978, p. 56). Substantive coding is the first step in the process and theoretical coding begins when all the substantive codes have been identified. During coding the three questions were asked: "What is the data a study of? What category does this incident indicate? What is actually happening in the data?" (Glaser, 1978, p. 57).

**Substantive codes.** The first type of codes applied to the data is the substantive code. The substantive code is developed by reviewing the collected data and generating "categories and their properties which fit, work and are relevant for integrating into a theory" (Glaser, 1978, p. 56). The substantive codes are generated by "running the data open" or open coding (Glaser, 1978, p. 56). Open coding means developing and applying codes for as many categories as possible including underlying ideas that might not have been explicitly stated

<b>Table 1: Data reduction</b>		
<b>Initial Codes</b>	<b>Selective Codes</b>	<b>Code Families</b>
Class size; division characteristics; language spoken; SOLs; solutions	Division characteristics	Context
AYP; federal involvement; IEP; NCLB; solutions	Policy	
community responses—negative; discrimination; ELLs--relationship with other students	Discrimination and prejudice	
ELL—needs; professionals--understanding of problem; trauma; underlying problems	Trauma	ELL Characteristics and Circumstances
ELL—needs; language acquisition; language, not disability; professionals--understanding of problem; teachers--knowledge of lang acquisition	Language acquisition	
Assimilation; challenges--cultural issues; cultural awareness; ELL--home life; families; parents—education; parents—work; siblings--role	Family Characteristics	
socioeconomics solutions	Socio-economics	
ESL teachers--role	ESOL teachers	Roles of Potential Supporters
parents—language; resources--interpreters/translators	Interpreters and translators	
administration—role; administration--support	Administrators	
teachers—commitment; teachers--knowledge of ELL needs; teachers--knowledge of lang acquisition; teachers--meeting needs; teachers--problems with; teachers—relationship; teachers—role; teachers--want SpEd designation	Teachers	
Experience; parents--accommodations for them; professionals--use of jargon; social work--education/training; social work—role; training/education	Social worker	
Families; parents--accommodations for them; parents—language; parents--participation parents—role; parents--understanding process; parents--want best for children	Family	
psychologists—attitude; psychologists--role	Psychologist	
collaboration—negative; collaboration—positive; MDT involvement; psychologists—relationship; Title I; Title I teacher	Interactions between the decision-makers	
pre-referral interventions; RTI	Pre-referral interventions	The Special Education Process
benevolent referral; ELL--behavior problems; mental health problems; referral process	Referrals to special education	
forcing evaluation; LD; SpED—evaluation; SpEd testing--language appropriate; special ed coordinator	Special education assessment	
IEP; SpED--qualifying	Special education eligibility	
disability label; SpED--stigma	Stigma of disability label	
over-identification; under identifying	Disproportional representation	
division resources; parents--access to resources; resources—school; resources available	Available resources	Resources
Documentation; resources—inappropriate; resources--inaccessible	Inappropriate or inaccessible resources	
Assimilation; consequences of not qualifying; resources--needed	Absence of community resources	

(Glaser, 1978, p. 56). Data was coded “line by line” (Glaser, 1978, p. 57) and received multiple codes when appropriate. While Glaser refers to “line by line” coding, it seems from the context he is offering a caution to the hasty researcher who skims the initial data or relies on overall impressions of the data (Glaser, 1978).

As data collection and coding progressed, the number of codes were narrowed as the core variable or two core variables were identified. Identifying the core category required conscious effort; it was not happenstance. As saturation neared, only core variables and related concepts were coded (or even noted during data collection). Glaser recommends 10 to 15 codes related to one or two core variables for a parsimonious theory (1978, p. 71). My final theory had 24 substantive codes divided into five code families. The code families are the primary foundation of the theory, resulting in a parsimonious but rich theory.

The constant comparison method of developing substantive codes progressed as data collection continued and ended when theoretical codes were applied. Initially, incident was compared to incident and numerous codes were developed, with an eye towards concepts "underlying uniformity and its varying conditions" (Glaser, 1978, p. 47). Next, the concept identified in the code was compared to new incidents. Finally, concepts were compared to concepts. Comparing concepts to concepts was the bridge between substantive coding and theoretical coding, as the underlying conceptual framework developed and was strengthened by these comparisons.

**Theoretical codes.** The second type of coding was theoretical codes. Theoretical codes tie the substantive core category codes together, forming the hypotheses for the theory. Theoretical codes moved the hypothetical relationships from implicit to explicit. These codes were derived from a "code family," a grouping of conceptual relationships which were used to

describe the interactions between substantive codes. Code families are not all inclusive or exclusive and are often interrelated. Examples of code families include: the degree family, e.g., limit, range, intensity, extent, amount; the type family, e.g., form, kinds, classes, genre; and the consensus family, e.g., clusters, agreements, conflict (Glaser, 1978, pp. 74-79).

<b>Table 2: Coding Process</b>			
<b>Raw Data</b>	<b>Open Codes</b>	<b>Selective Code</b>	<b>Theoretical Codes</b>
Some of these kids only started hearing English in kindergarten, and they argue that the children have conversations just fine. Research shows it takes at least 5-7 years to develop the academic language; their social language develops much earlier.	ELL—needs Language acquisition Professionals-- understanding of problem Teachers—knowledge of language acquisition	Language acquisition	Contributes to characteristics and circumstances of ELLs; is integral in understanding the family role in supporting ELLs

## **Memos**

The third element in the constant comparison cycle was memoing. Memos are the "core stage" of theory generation (Glaser, 1978, p. 83). While collecting and analyzing data, memos were written to record developments and thoughts related to the variables and concepts. Writing memos begins at the first stages of data collection and can continue through the final draft of the theory is written (Glaser, 1978, p. 118). The key directive is to write memos whenever the urge strikes, even if that means setting aside coding or writing (Glaser, 1978, p. 83). The content of a memo can be anything related to the data and the analysis but generally achieves one of five goals:

1. It raises the data to a conceptualization level.

2. It develops the properties of each category which begins to define it operationally.
3. It presents hypotheses about connections between categories and/or their properties.
4. It begins to integrate these connections with clusters of other categories to generate the theory.
5. Lastly, it begins to locate the emerging theory with other theories with potentially more or less relevance. (Glaser, 1978, p. 84)

Sometimes memos do not achieve one of the goals but they may still be useful to clarify a point or spark another idea (Glaser, 1978).

Memos were important to this process and were developed continuously and in a way that made them easy to sort. Initially, I recorded memos in Atlas.ti, but found handwriting in the field or recording in Microsoft Word was an easier process. When there was a lag in memo writing, I "forced" memos by writing about codes (Glaser, 1978, p. 90). Memos were written freely, without regard to grammar, and varied in length from a sentence to a many paragraphs as recommended by Glaser (1978, pp. 84-95). Finally, all memos were given a title in order to assist with sorting in the final stages of theory development (Glaser, 1978, p. 78). The title summarized the contents concisely and specifically, such as "more children should be in SpED" but not too simply, such as "theory."

## **Sorting**

The final stage of the CGT analytic process is sorting. This is when the theory crystallizes. Once theoretical saturation was reached, data collection and coding stopped and only memoing continued. The memos were sorted in a way that clarified the concepts and provided support to the core variable(s). Sorting is focused and selective and leaves out concepts that are not related to the core theory (Glaser, 1978, p. 116). Sorting was focused on



one purpose, in this case writing a dissertation. Memos can be re-sorted for other purposes at other times (Glaser, 1978, p. 117). During this stage, *more* memos were written as they helped generate theoretical clarity (Glaser, 1978, p. 118).

<b>Table 3: Memo development and sorting</b>			
<b>Memo Title</b>	<b>Memo Body</b>	<b>Memo linked to codes</b>	<b>Role in Final Theory</b>
12.12.10 more children should be in SpED	Seems to think a label-specifically LD-isn't a big deal and maybe more kids should be qualified? Seems to really want to find kids eligible. Not sure what I think of this, but I think this is done in kindness...definitely wants the best for these kids.	Referrals to special education Disproportional representation Stigma of disability label	Social worker support for ELLs by connecting to special education as a resources when other resources are inaccessible or unavailable

Glaser suggests eleven analytic rules guide the sorting process (Glaser, 1978, pp. 120-127). (1) Sorting should start anywhere, as long as it starts; (2) Categories and properties should only be sorted in relation to the core variable; (3) Only one variable can be called the core variable, though there may be a sub-variable; (4) Memoing should continue, even it means interrupting sorting; (5) Concepts can be "carried forward" which allows them to build and become more complex as they are expanded in subsequent descriptions and sections of writing; (6) All memos must be included in the theory; (7) Sorting is done on levels (e.g., chapters and sections); (8) Ideas that cause problems might be in the wrong place or might be one of the few ideas that do not belong in the theory; (9) Sorting is complete when theoretical completeness is reached (discussed more in the following paragraph). The final two rules have to do with the mechanics of sorting (including irrelevant suggestions such as cutting up

memos, assuming this is entirely a paper based process) and pacing (e.g., flexible time to sort).

One particularly important analytic rule was number nine, which deals with theoretical completeness. A theory reaches completeness when it "explains with the fewest possible concepts, and with the greatest possible scope, as much variation as possible in the behavior and problem under study" (Glaser, 1978, p. 125). Because this study was limited to social workers, clearly a full understanding of ELLs entering special education could not be reached but a full understanding of the role of social work might have been reached. CGT allows that theoretical completeness can be reached if sorting brings the researcher as close to theoretical coverage as possible given the bounds of that particular study (Glaser, 1978, p. 125).

Sorting was done primarily with printed material. Memos were in various formats (handwritten, Microsoft Word, and Atlas.ti) and codes were recorded in Atlas.ti. For the manipulation of codes, Atlas.ti proved to be a stellar software package. However, sorting was much faster and more intuitive using paper.

### **Products**

There are two products from this study. (1) a report that is usable to the participants, and (2) the groundwork for follow up testing. Both products are based on the discovered theory. Glaser is very clear that CGT should result in usable material, for both the participants and others who are involved in the research area and in the form of academic presentations, e.g., journal articles, books, conference presentations (Glaser, 1998).

The first product is a report that contains some usable information for the participants and other school social workers. Glaser is enthusiastic about the ability of researchers to contribute to the understanding the “man [*sic*] in the know” receives from reports on

discovered theory as it helps “connect the dots” of practice (Glaser, 1978, p. 12). Grounded theory, Glaser asserts, should be “fun” and “sought after” by being practical and useful (Glaser, 1978, p. 27). It is important that a grounded theory has “grab” and that the layman can grasp and envision how the theory works (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The report has been prepared for the dissertation and will be shared with participants. A shortened report with the highlights of the findings will be distributed as well.

Secondly, the core variable and related concepts will be the basis of further theory development and testing. This aspect was not fully developed or distributed during this study but will be used in the future. While CGT is clearly focused on the discovery element of theory, its positivistic assumptions are consistent with what will probably involve survey research to test the theory.

### **Rigor**

Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest demonstrating credibility in order to evaluate a grounded theory (p. 223). Since CGT does not have its own clear set of standards for evaluation and the study is qualitative, I turned first towards positivistic qualitative evaluation standards. (There are standards for grounded theory evaluation, but not *classic* grounded theory).

Positivistic standards of rigor usually include both reliability and validity but in this study only validity was evaluated. Reliability is often not evaluated in qualitative studies and when it is, the emphasis tends to be on consistency of coding, particularly inter-coder agreement (Creswell, 2007) which is not applicable to most CGT studies where one person is expected to code and a code book is not developed (Glaser, 1998). Further, the CGT process

is an emergent one which cannot be checked against itself, nor is the process repeated as the conceptual categories are subject to temporal changes (Glaser, 1978).

Internal validity is the rigor related to how a study is conducted. Glaser and Strauss (1967) mention three dimensions of internal validity—credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness. Unfortunately, credibility is only minimally described and plausibility and trustworthiness are completely ambiguous. Though a chapter in their seminal book is dedicated to credibility, Glaser and Strauss (1967) mostly use it to rail against the establishment and dominant quantitative dimensions of rigor and suggest a researcher will know a theory is credible “because ‘in his bones’ he feels the worth of the final analysis” (p. 225).

Creswell suggests relying on strategies to evaluate validity, rather than concepts such as “credibility” (2007). Since the dimensions of rigor in CGT are not described, I used the strategies to assure rigor of the study (Creswell, 2007), with the addition of a strategy from constructivist inquiry (Rodwell, 1998). Creswell suggests using at least two of eight recommended strategies (2007). This study included three of the eight recommended strategies, plus one concept from constructivist inquiry: clarifying researcher bias; triangulation; member checking (Creswell, 2007); and confirmability (Rodwell, 1998). The strategies were chosen both for feasibility and consistency with CGT.

**Clarifying researcher bias.** Clarifying researcher bias allows readers to understand the assumptions and perspectives of the researcher, and should be done prior to entering the field (Creswell, 2007). When beginning a CGT the researcher is expected to set aside bias and enter the field “empty headed” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 121). Clearly, this is unrealistic

and clarifying bias is an accepted way of acknowledging and setting aside bias in a positivistic paradigm.

In this study, the first memo contained my biases and assumptions, and, when necessary, I added additional memos to help clarify the differences between my pre-existing bias and what was found in the data. For example, from the literature I know that one study found social workers and parents are the least influential participants in placement meetings (Klingner & Harry, 2006). When data seemed to confirm my biases, I was careful to examine this and if I realized it during an interview I checked it with the participant in an attempt to collect disconfirming information.

In one case, I used a term I had read in the literature and when I realized it I backed up the interview out of concern for forcing the information on the participant. She carefully considered it but dismissed my concern and felt the term (benevolent referral) accurately reflected what she was trying to describe. At that point, it was too late to “take back” that phrase. Although it came from my bias and knowledge, it did seem to ring true with the participant.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation involves using evidence from various sources to corroborate what has been discovered (Creswell, 2007). While not explicitly supporting this strategy the CGT dictum that “all is data” are consistent with triangulation. For this study, triangulation was found in comparing interview data with data in the literature, and school documents. This was done by revisiting the literature review and adding to the discussion in Chapter 5, not by incorporating literature as data to be analyzed as part of Chapter 4.

**Member checking.** Member checking allows participants to review analysis of data and offer feedback. While not called member checking, Glaser (1978) suggests allowing a

couple top informants to review the categories and concepts and offer input (p. 47). Once I identified the core concept as support for ELLs and redefined the problem as the disconnect between the needs of ELLs and the resources available to them, I conducted phone interviews with three of the participants. This informed the analysis process, as the members were able to confirm the core variable and problem, and expand and define related concepts.

When conducting the initial interviews, I asked each participant if she would be interested in participating in a second interview by phone to provide input on theory and concept development, or to review the written theory. All participants expressed interest in participating in follow up phone calls or second interviews. When the initial interviews were complete, I sent an email to all participants asking if they were available for second interviews. Five expressed interest, and three were scheduled and completed.

After including data from those interviews into the theory, I sent the written report to four participants: the only participant involved in *a priori* research, and both initial and secondary interviews; a participant from a high ELL school division; a participant from a low ELL school division; and a participant who disagreed during the phone interview with some of my initial understanding of the theory. Along with the written report, the participants were asked:

- Does this generally reflect your experiences?
- Are there specific parts of the theory that resonate with you? Or, does this seem not at all like your experiences? Please explain.
- Is there information or an understanding here that might inform your work with ELL students or families?
- Do you see gaps in the ideas? Things that seem absent?
- Any other thoughts?

One week after sending the written document, I sent a reminder requesting feedback. I did not receive any written comments.

**Confirmability.** The goal of confirmability, a concept in constructivist inquiry, is to demonstrate “that the results as reported are linked to the data” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 100). Though constructivist inquiry does not operate under positivist assumptions, the concept of confirmability is related to objectivity (Rodwell, 1998, p. 97) and can easily be translated into the positivist paradigm. From a positivist viewpoint, this may be described as a chain of evidence in which the researcher is expected to show where the data came from and how they ended up in the theory. Organized field notes, linked to expanded notes, linked to codes, linked to memos, provide this chain of evidence. Field notes were handwritten and linked to expanded notes by date and participant initials. Expanded notes, codes, and memos were linked using the methods in the software package Atlas.ti and in Microsoft Word. Using this method, an external auditor, had I to employed one, would have been able to see how a participant’s comment became a key concept. The report of the findings includes references to the data found in the interviews as a kind of audit trail for anyone interested in following it to raw data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The posture of the researcher in a CGT is one of humility and respect for the participants (Glaser, 1978, p. 12). While this is not specifically presented as an ethical issue, it does frame the roles of researcher and participant in an ethical manner. As a researcher, I was expected to be able to understand, collect, and sort the data into a reasonably helpful theory. The participants are the ones who *know* the data. It was my role to protect both the data and the people who provide it, in a way that moves beyond legalistic ethical codes (which are

important, too) to include respect for the individuals. This section discusses basic human subjects protections as well as areas of CGT which were modified in order to demonstrate this ethical obligation to the participants.

### **Risk**

Known risk to the participants is minimal. No participants expressed discomfort discussing ELLs entering special education. The topic can be politically sensitive, and some participants could have felt uncomfortable discussing work-related decisions, procedures, or problems. Participants were told they could withdraw from the study at any time, and they could choose to have their data removed from the study. No one chose to do so.

### **Informed consent**

All participants were given the opportunity to understand the study, to agree to participate, and to withdrawal at any time during the process. This informed consent process occurred after recruitment and prior to any interview began. The signed informed consent documents were kept in a locked file cabinet, in a locked office and will be destroyed when the project concludes.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality was assured through protected data, coded notes, and use of quotations without identifying data. Handwritten notes were kept in a locked file cabinet. Expanded field notes were stored on a password protected laptop in Microsoft Word and Atlas.ti. Interview notes were dated and marked with only the first initial of the person interviewed, and any contact information was stored separately from the data.



## **Privacy**

The privacy of individuals was protected during the study in recruitment procedures, interview plans, and termination of participation. During the recruitment phase, potential participants were asked to initiate contact with me, not vice versa (except for those known to the research prior to the start of research, as approved by the VCU IBR). Interviews were either in person or by telephone, in a place both participant and researcher believed would offer an acceptable level of privacy. Participants were informed of their right to terminate participation in the study at any time for any reason, and could choose to have their data excluded from the study.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study will be considered in two categories, ethics and feasibility. The first category contains limitations which result from changes to the CGT design due to modern ethical considerations in human subjects protections. In all cases, requirements of the IRB are more important than guidelines for conducting CGT research. The second category contains limitations resulting from feasibility.

### **Limitations due to Ethical Considerations**

Some aspects of classic grounded theory do not conform with human services protections requirements, thus three adjustments were made to the methodology, all related to an element of the design called theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling, a key element in CGT, is based on the assumption that the researcher makes initial data collection decisions "based only on a general sociological perspective" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). In order to know little about the area of interest, the researcher is instructed to not read the literature making it impossible to complete a literature review as required in a dissertation and for an

IRB proposal. This lack of knowledge is designed to allow the concepts to emerge from the data without preconceived ideas about what will be found or how it is theoretically connected. Interviews should be completely open-ended, so concepts, theoretical links, and the problem itself can emerge from the data. As information is discovered, the researcher is expected to both modify the line of inquiry and find new groups to be part of the sample. There are three aspects of theoretical sampling that were adjusted in this study: the literature review; the extent to which interviews were open-ended; and the sampling technique.

**Literature review changes.** When conducting a CGR study there is a clear recommendation--indeed a "very strong dicta" (Glaser, 1998, p. 67)--on completing a literature review: don't (Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1998). In a CGT, a literature review is not recommended as it is "inimical to generating grounded theory" (Glaser, 1998, p. 67). The researcher must be theoretically sensitive, free of preconceived notions and open to new ideas found in the data, not in preexisting research (Glaser, 1998). When it is required, Glaser suggests the best time to read the related literature is after data have been collected (Glaser, 1978, p. 32; Glaser, 1998, p. 67). The existing research should be treated as data in the final theory and should not be "revere[d] for the authenticity and authority of the published word and the author" (Glaser, 1998, p. 72).

Researchers have acknowledged that sometimes a literature review is necessary when using CGT methodology, but only to meet a requirement (Glaser, 1998; Xie, 2009) or because it is unrealistic to not know the literature (McCallin, 2003). Glaser recognizes that while completing a dissertation a literature review is sometimes required (Glaser, 1998, p. 72). Xie described a "compromised GT proposal" (2009, p. 35) written for the purpose of meeting program requirements. McCallin (2003) argues that Glaser's position is "somewhat ideal" (p.

64) and with the abundance of literature available today, especially electronically, outdated (p. 64).

Reading the literature is not just necessary to meet dissertation requirements (though it does that, too), nor is it simply a realistic approach in the electronic age: Reading the literature is ethically required to maximize possible benefits to participants. A literature review provides the researcher with an understanding of a problem area through existing studies. Without knowledge of this, a researcher essentially goes blindly into a research area and potentially wastes participants' time, potentially violating the requirements of respect and beneficence.

**Interviews.** In a CGT, interviews are meant to be completely open-ended (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1998). There should be no interview protocol, dimensions, concepts, or other pre-planned guidance in conducting the interview (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1998). This is not consistent with IRB expectations which require an explanation of the line of inquiry. Without foreknowledge of the type of inquiry it is impossible for a participant to give informed consent because they are not informed of what they will be expected to discuss. The limitation of restricting the line of inquiry to pre-approved dimensions is that the theory may be grounded in the wrong data if a major category is not known prior to the beginning of the research. In an attempt to minimize this limitation, I based the dimensions on existing literature and prior ethnography. These dimensions are purposefully broad with the intent of capturing all data related to the research area.

**Sample.** As part of emergent design, Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend determining groups to be sampled as the data are gathered and suggest a new direction. This type of sampling is problematic for meeting human subject protections requirements. It is a requirement of IRB approval that the groups to be interviewed are known prior to beginning

the research so protections for special groups (e.g., children) can be met. IRB approved recruitment procedures and other documents also must be altered for a new group, making it potentially burdensome and time consuming to apply for modifications to the study.

### **Limitations due to Feasibility**

There are feasibility limitations of this study related to time, funding, and access. Sample size and characteristics of the sample were major limitations, and was the result of difficulty finding and recruiting participants. The limitations included conducting the study with one group (social workers) rather than many, conducting the study in one state (Virginia), and no observations of processes were made. The method of interviewing, including many phone interviews, perhaps limited the type and variety of data collected. Finally, the characteristics of the school divisions made it difficult to generalize findings.

**Recruitment and sample size.** While theoretical saturation was reached, meaning new concepts were not being generated, the data could have been richer had more participants provided data. Recruiting school social workers proved to be incredibly difficult. Public information was sometimes outdated or not available at all. Two face-to-face recruitment attempts were not successful. Participants at a school social work conferences expressed interest in the recruitment materials (the flyer and the informed consent), but did not schedule face-to-face interviews or follow up phone calls.

**Sample characteristics.** All the participants were female. In CGT, diverse samples are not required or suggested, but from a social work perspective I know people with diverse experiences will bring unique perspectives and should be included and recruited. Male social workers were included in the standard recruitment procedures (available lists). Two male

social workers expressed interest in participating, and one signed a consent form. Neither scheduled interviews despite multiple phone calls to the consented social worker.

**One group as the sample.** Only the social work perspective was included in this study. While theirs is an important perspective, one which has not been examined before, it is not possible to explore the whole of ELLs entering special education without including various groups such as educators and administrators. Perhaps the most glaring and concerning limitation, particularly from a social justice perspective and empowerment approach, is the lack of ELL student or family participation. This certainly limits the testing and application of the theory. The central resolving variable, supporting ELLs, might be relevant to school personnel, but might not be directly relevant to ELL families. In other words, the theory might not look the same with all stakeholders included as it does from the social work perspective. In the future, I do hope to include more groups in a similar study.

**Limited scope of study.** The study took place in the state of Virginia, and the sample is limited to school social workers in that state. While an effort was made to recruit social workers from different areas of the state, the scope is still limited to reality of conditions in Virginia. Each state has unique policies and practices, such as how social workers are licensed and the availability of services, that would certainly influence the final theory, limiting the external validity of the final products.

**Observations.** Qualitative studies often rely on observation of the processes included in the interviews (Creswell, 2007) as a way to triangulate the data and get a better sense of reality. Due to access issues, no observations of processes related to ELLs entering special education (e.g., placement meetings) occurred. These types of observations would have added considerably to the data and perhaps push the theory in a different direction.

**Interview mechanics.** The interviews were conducted face-to-face when possible, and some were conducted over the phone. Face-to-face interviews felt more natural and produced more data (for the most part). I was able to observe body language which sometimes encouraged me to end or dig deeper in a line of questioning; on the phone, I tended to follow the series of pre-written questions a bit more with less follow up probing.

**Division characteristics.** The great variety in ELL related division characteristics—from those with a handful of ELL students to those with a large percentage—was both a strength and a limitation. Certainly, it enhanced the breadth and variability of knowledge and meant I was able to capture that full range of experiences. However, it also made it more difficult to find a main concern and a core variable to resolve the concern. I am left wondering if the core concern would have been different among only divisions with small numbers of ELLs compared to divisions with larger numbers. Further, I do not know if that matters. Could it be that the core concern of the divisions with larger number would eventually be the concern of divisions with smaller numbers? That will be for future testing.

## Chapter Four: Results

The goal of Glaserian grounded theory “is to discover the core variable as it resolves the main concern” (Glaser, 1998, p. 115). The goal requires two distinct steps, identifying the main concern or problem and identifying the variable or concept that resolves or attempts to resolve it. The core variable can only be explained “from the point of view of the actors involved” (Glaser, 1998, p. 115). The core variable emerges as the overriding pattern of information from the participants because this is how they see the problem and its resolution.

Grounded theory requires an absence of preconceived ideas about the problem. I attempted to adhere to this idea at the beginning of the research by noting that the “disproportionality [of English language learners (ELLs) in special education] is *a* problem, not *the* problem” (p. 11). However, I continued with the underlying assumption that the problem of disproportional representation was related to a problem with ELLs entering special education (p. 11). I was wrong.

### **An Introduction to the Core Variable and the Main Concern**

The core variable of this theory is *supporting ELLs* as it resolves *the disconnect between the needs of ELLs and the resources available to them*, the main concern (see Figure 1). Supporting ELLs means that the people involved—social workers, psychologists, and other school personnel, and families—can provide adequate resources to ELL students to function in their everyday lives and, in keeping with the goals of the school, to succeed in an educational setting.

*The disconnect between the needs of ELLs and the resources available to them*

requires (1) identifying the needs and (2) connecting to resources. Neither is a simple proposition. From an ecological perspective, social workers consider individual functioning in the context of overlapping layers of influences, including the school and family settings, and society. Needs might be individual—say, a behavior modification—but in the context of a disorganized home life, or a struggle with language acquisition, or both. Schools are set up to be institutions of learning and are often unable or unwilling to acknowledge this broad context of defining need.

Even when participants are encouraged or even allowed to take the time to assess the needs of ELLs, there is a disconnect between the needs ELLs have and the resources available to meet those needs. It is the “square peg in the round hole” problem. A student needs more structure at home, but the resource offered is a school-based behavior modification plan. The student needs more time to learn English, but she is perceived to speak it well enough so she is put in special education. The resources are often missing, inappropriate, or inaccessible.

The structure of the theory is formed by the “type code family” which are theoretical codes that group concepts by kind, class or genre (Glaser, 1978, pp. 76). The type codes are context, ELL characteristics and circumstances, roles, resources, and the special education process. These describe the relationship between substantive codes, but are not interrelated. A second family of theoretical codes, the consensus family, describes the relationships between codes and often overlaps (Glaser, 1978, pp. 74-79). This layer of coding provides the substance of the theory.

Together, the context and the characteristics and circumstances of ELLs define the needs of ELLs which is central to understanding the problem (see Figure 2, p. 91). The



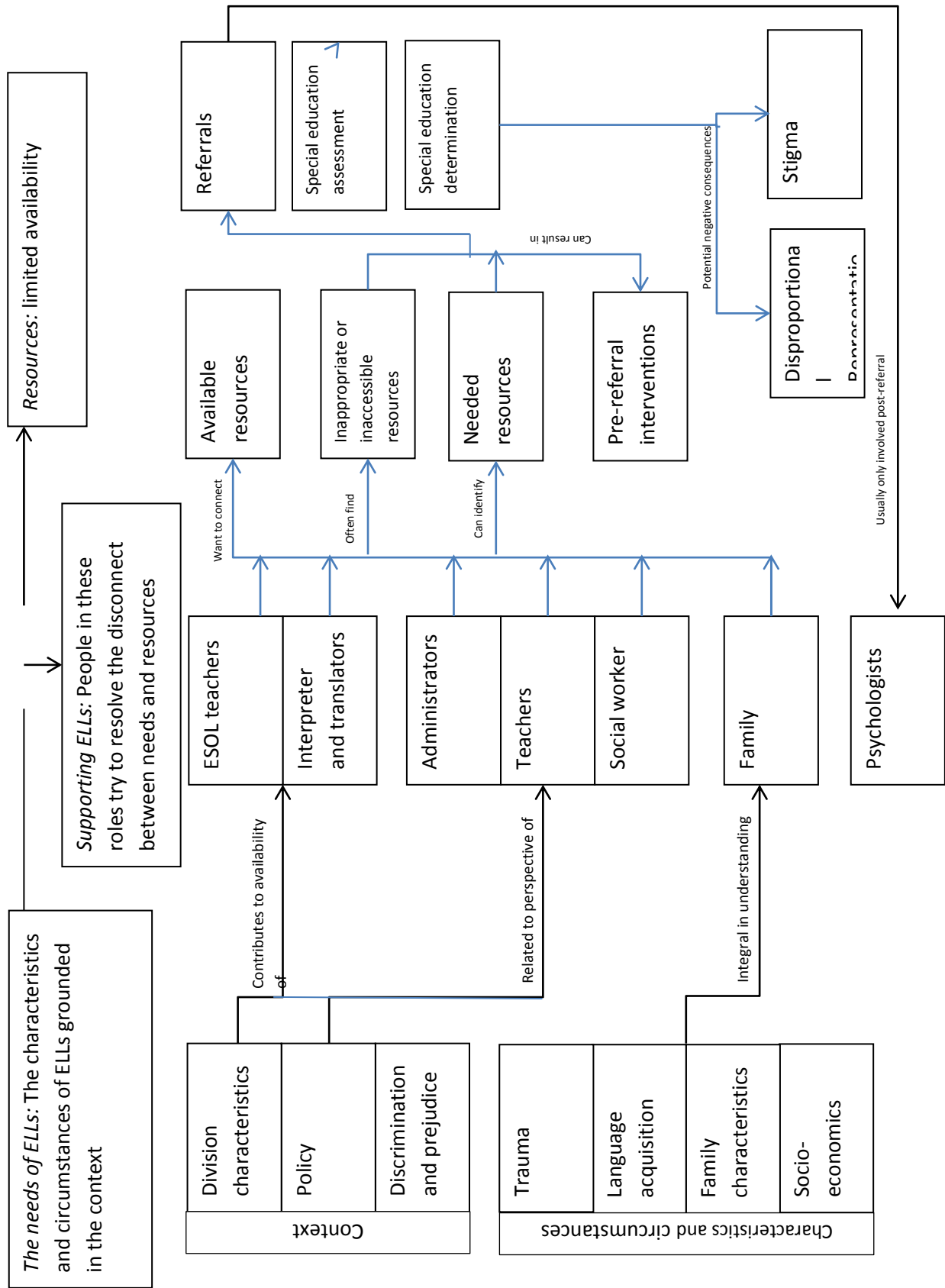


Figure 2: Overview of Code Relationships

context (policy, division characteristics, and discrimination and prejudice) *contribute to the availability of* ESOL teachers, and interpreters and translators, and is *related to the perspective of* administrators, teachers, and social workers. The characteristics and circumstances (trauma, language acquisition, family characteristics, and socio-economics) are *integral in understanding* the perspective of the family. The people in roles intended to support ELLs, *try to connect* ELL student to resources designed to meet their needs. What they *often find* are resources that are inappropriate or inaccessible. They also *recognize* the need for different or more resources based on the needs of ELLs.

When there is a disconnect between the needs of ELLs and available, appropriate and accessible resources, it *can result in* special education referrals. Certainly, there are ELLs who have special needs and require special education. The participants in this research tended to talk about ELLs who had needs—such as emotional problems resulting from trauma—that manifest themselves in behaviors that could not be controlled in the classroom. This could result in a referral to special education that might have been better handled with other resources. While some were compelled to make a referral so a student could have access to some kind of services, they also recognized the *potential consequences of* special education placement could be disproportional representation and lifelong stigma.

The special education process is unique for ELLs because of language and cultural issues, but is not the central element of this theory. It is an activity rather than *the* activity. That is, the original intention of this research was to examine that special education process for ELLs, but the data overwhelmingly points to a picture much bigger than that process. Not all ELLs are referred to special education because of unmet needs; some needs are just left unmet. Further, not all ELLs have unmet needs.

What follows is the core variable—the problem and the resolution—as described by the actors—the social workers (acknowledging this is just one set of the actors involved in the special education process as it relates to ELLs). The substantive codes are connected by theoretical codes (see Table 1, p. 71). Citations are listed in this format from Atlas.ti: P19:27 (primary document number 19: quotation 27).

### **The Context**

The social work perspective on supporting ELLs is placed squarely in the middle of what is happening in their division and their community. The participants in this study described their frustration with national social policy, in particular the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. The division characteristics vary widely, from divisions with a handful of ELL students and little in the way of resources, to divisions with a high percentage of ELL students and robust resources (though still not always appropriate or accessible). The ELL students are further placed in the context of the discrimination and prejudice in society and even in the schools.

The context is comprised of three substantive codes: policy; division characteristics; and discrimination and prejudice. The proportion of ELLs in a district in the division of the ELL population contributes to the availability of certain ELL specific resources, e.g. divisions with higher ELL populations have more ESOL teachers and interpreters and translators. The context is also related to the perspective of administrators, teachers, and social workers.

### **Policy**

Policy is a macro influence in the ecological perspective. There are many areas of policy that impact ELLs—health, economic, housing, among other social policies. However, while most policies received passing mention by the social workers in this study, the *No Child*

*Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) was front and center in everyone's mind (e.g., P18:70; P19:63; 24:6; P37:40). NCLB, signed into law in 2002, introduced standards based education reform. Now shorthand for elements of the bill—SOLs for standards of learning and AYP for adequate yearly progress—is peppered in discussion of expectations and pressures in schools. The two sub-themes of this category are (1) principals and teachers are under a great deal of pressure to meet AYP (e.g., P18:40; P27:29); and (2) the policy does not match the reality of meeting the needs of ELLs or other children with special needs(e.g., P:27:42; P32:12).

First, social workers perceive a great deal of pressure on teachers to meet AYP and ELLs frustrate that goal for some teachers. The SOLs are used to measure whether or not AYP is being met in a school. Principals and teachers are described as “frustrated” (P18:140) and under “pressure” (P20:62; P27:29). “I think the stresses put upon teachers to meet the letter of the law are inhibiting teachers rather than encouraging them” (P27:40). Rather than focusing on “student progress from grade to grade, they are focused on AYP” (P20:64). One social worker summarized it like this:

The teachers are under pressure to make AYP, they can't have these kids holding them back. No Child Left Behind is great in theory, but not in practice. It really doesn't take into account children with special needs. Just this year I've really gained a greater appreciation for the pressure teachers are under to make AYP. (P19:63)

The pressures are great, teachers may even feel like they could lose their job if they don't meet AYP (P27:29). Social workers are empathetic towards the teachers required to operate under the law. But they are also frustrated on behalf of the students when the policy leads to increased referrals to special education: “[t]eachers with the demands of the SOLs sometimes jump to the resources” (P30:4) and “[w]e are under a lot of pressure to identify because it

makes the schools look better” (P24:9).

Second, social workers do not think the NCLB requirements take into account the needs of ELL students and others with special needs. Although “there are leniencies in policy, we are not required to have as many [ELLs] pass” (P32:12), most social workers still think the leniencies are not enough. “ESL students are given some leeway on the SOLs, but at some point they must be tested up to regular standards and they might not be ready, we know they aren’t ready” (P18:76). The law is called “unrealistic” (P18:100) and “unfair” because it does not take into consideration the language acquisition process (P27:41). Policymakers are seen as out of touch with the experiences of ELLs and other struggling students because they “are not in our classrooms to see all these little faces and that they are not necessarily raised with the same experiences as them” (P27:42).

### **Division Characteristics**

School and division characteristics are the first layer of macro level of assessment, as this forms one of the communities to which the child belongs. It is a community the child spends a great deal of time in, the social worker operates from and in, where many interventions take place, and resources are distributed. Because this study set out to recruit social workers from diverse school divisions, the differences in resource availability, experience working with ELLs, and characteristics of the ELL population are widely varied. Schools fell roughly into one of two categories: experienced and inexperienced.

The experienced divisions had immigrant, refugee and ELL populations in their schools for many years and at numbers large enough that the social workers described the students as normal. Though experienced divisions tended to be more urban, a rural division described having “third generation Latino families ...[they] were moving up the coast as

migrant workers, but here we have poultry plants so families stayed with year round work” (P27:18). These divisions generally have children who speak a wide range of languages. Spanish is mentioned most often as a primary language, but other languages such as Kurdish, Arabic, Russian, were included when describing the division (P18:11; P24:5; P27:16). Some divisions had dozens of languages being spoken by their ELL students which created its own set of challenges (discussed more in the resources section). Social workers from these divisions have more resources at their fingertips and have more experience with the families (P18:11; P23:5; P27:4).

The inexperienced divisions had either very small or very new ELL populations, the students in these schools were still viewed as anomalies. The social workers could describe a handful of ELL families they worked with in great detail (e.g., P24:4, 82). They had access to fewer ELL specific resources and were aware of that.

Some social workers talked about the differences in the divisions, particularly noting the differences between rural and urban divisions (though this is not always an accurate picture of the experience of different divisions). One participant described the differences as being unequal in terms of the type of ELL students:

We deal with different ESL students. I think there are two different kinds of ESLs-the ones in Northern Virginia have more educated parents; there are a lot of diplomats; they have fewer poverty issues. The ones in this division have poverty issues; the parents aren’t educated; it is tougher. (P18:36)

Some social workers noted the difference between living in one setting and working in another, such as living near a city with greater diversity than the county they live in (P24:4; P28:34).

## **Discrimination and prejudice**

In assessing ELLs, one of the overarching problems is their experiences with discrimination and prejudice in the school and the community. School based discrimination can be among the children (P18:120) and the school employees (P18:116, 126; P19:102; P21:90). School based prejudice can result in lowered (and increased) expectations for different ethnic groups (P18:126) and discrimination in suspension and expulsion rates (P21:90). In the community, students might experience differential treatment, fear, and other biases.

## **ELL Characteristics and Circumstances**

When conducting an assessment from an ecological perspective social workers begin with the micro level, the individual. Some individual issues are clearly an individual issue of functioning—a disruptive behavior, for example—even if the reasons for that problem are best understood in the context of the entire environment. Other problems are so intertwined with mezzo and macro levels that it can be difficult to sort them out. As an example, a child attended school for four years in a refugee camp in Nepal, and the instruction was not in his language (P32:13-14). He now has an individual, or micro level, problem related to education, but the fact that he has only had one year of schooling could be a family expectation, mezzo level, but is more likely related to systemic, or macro level, problems. In this section, the focus is on the individual level of functioning, with the acknowledgment that there is much overlap with other levels of assessment.

Together with the context, the characteristics and the circumstances form the basis for identifying the needs of ELLs. The characteristics and circumstances are integral to understanding the role of family as supporters interested in meeting the needs of ELLs.

## **Trauma**

The code for trauma includes a mention of the specific word trauma and is used to describe an event or events in ELL's lives. According to social workers in this study, many—certainly not all—ELLs have experienced trauma at various stages in their lives. Trauma was not specifically defined by the participants, it was described. Examples of trauma include community violence (P21:10) and domestic violence (P21:10; P30: 9:10), specific acts such as “he saw his father shot” (P30:9). Some participants used the word trauma without any specific context of when or how a child may have experienced it (P23:15; P26:66; P30:3).

Those participants who mentioned trauma were concerned that the behavioral and emotional results of trauma are not being appropriately assessed and treated in schools. A participant expressed concern that there is an awareness of trauma, but the focus is on the outcome:

You read social histories and you see he witnessed domestic violence, he saw his father shot. Yes, he has behavior maladjustment. There is cognitive recognition of his experiences but no connection [to the trauma experience], they are just saying this is the behavior and that [behavior] is the problem. (P30:9-10)

Social workers viewed trauma as a complex issue in ELLs that schools are not able to deal with. “The way schools are funded...they are not funded and set up to be centers of healing.” (P23:19). There is a lack of resources (P21:46,88; P23:19, 25).

## **Language acquisition**

Understanding of how language is acquired is important to social workers because not knowing the English language can be mistaken for a disability. Though some admit to knowing little about how language is acquired (P19:96), all had some grasp of the process and



most had concerns about other school personnel understanding it. Even ESOL teachers sometimes appear not to understand the stages of language acquisition (P22:84). Social workers recognize the need for a “first language” in which they are fluent in speaking, reading, and writing as the foundation for learning a second (or third) language. The primary source for frustration among social workers is the lack of understanding about the difference between social and academic language, and the related concern of the length of time language takes to acquire.

Language acquisition is not a normal element of the knowledge base for social workers, but even those who have worked with very few ELLs recognize that language is acquired in stages. Second language acquisition differs from first language acquisition and is generally understood to take place in five stages. The first is called pre-production when the language is quite new to the child. The student would obviously not understand much, aside from maybe a couple simple phrases.

Around stages three and four a student might seem to speak English very well and this can cause hiccups in the special education process. Social workers in this study did not refer to the five stages of language acquisition but they used the descriptive terms “social language” and “conversational language,” and is sometimes called “television language” (because it can be acquired through watching television) or “playground language.” Children at this stage can carry on a conversation. They can respond and share unique thoughts and ideas.

Teachers say if you just watch TV you can learn a lot! It drives me nuts! Teachers and principals sometimes confuse that kind of language for really knowing the language, they have expectations that the child is fluent and they aren’t!! (P24:79)

However, this level of language acquisition is very different from the fluency in the academic language level, in which a child can understand difficult and elevated academic concepts.

General education teachers and administrators sometimes confuse the ability of a child to talk to them conversationally as an ability to understand the language in the classroom. Teachers and administrators “argue that the children have conversations just fine” (P22:18) and sometimes refer to conversations they have had with a student:

So they will talk to a kid in an interview, and they say, “Yes. Yes. Yes ma’am,” so the consequence is the administrator says the kid understood and you talk to families and they say the kid was clueless. (P30:15)

A lot of staff are not very sophisticated with language. We might have principals who say, “oh, I talk to them all the time their English is great.” But they might appear to have conversational language but they do not have descriptive language. (P24:12)

Confusing these stages of language would not be so maddening to social workers if the stakes were lower—but when the result might mean placement in special education, there is great concern that school personnel need to understand language better. Language acquisition can be a long process, as noted by many social workers. The time frame for developing academic language was described as 5-7 years with social language developing “much earlier” (P22:18). One social worker noted that this time frame is for “a child without learning or behavioral issues” (P27:29).

Social workers are adamant that “a language difference is not a disability” (P27:5). In some divisions, they are concerned that teachers are pushing for special education when the child needs more time and assistance in learning to speak English. “Some teachers bring the same kids back year after year to child study and we say, this child does not have a LD, it is

language! Language!” (P18:94) There are similar problems with principles, particularly in light of the SOLs, but in some divisions “they are getting more educated about it...about language acquisition and labeling LDs” (P18:142). Social workers acknowledge that “[i]t is tricky sometimes to weed out the differences between language acquisition and a learning disability” (P22:20), but it is necessary in order to provide the appropriate services to the child.

Participants recognize the need for ELL children to have a first language, one in which they are fluent in speaking, reading, and writing. One social worker described that this allows for information from your second language to be pinned to information in the native language (P18:110). The lack of formal education in a first language for both the child and the parent can contribute to the problem:

I get frustrated with teachers because they say language isn’t the issue, they say the child speaks English, but they don’t recognize the stages of language acquisition. The teachers don’t recognize that children many speak their native language at home, enter school and learn English, but never have academic training in their native language so they don’t have a “first” language in which they are literate. The first language issue, literacy, and knowing the language for higher level academic concepts is acute.

Sometimes parents may not have much formal education so they can’t provide that academic language in the child’s first or home language. (P18:22-26)

Referring to past assessments, one social worker laments the lack of knowledge about language acquisition and the need for a first language:

I was very concerned we were missing children with language delays. A child really needs to have a foundation in one language. We did not recognize how very important

that one language is the dominant language. (P27:10)

Socioeconomic class might make this problem even more acute (P27:21). Some participants recommended bilingual education as a way to establish the first language, paving the way for second language acquisition.

While social workers are not experts in language acquisition, they have a basic understanding of it and try to convey that to teachers, administrators and other school personnel as appropriate. They include language foundation information in socio-cultural assessments (P27:9) and try to describe it in individual or team meetings. The exception to this frustration about lack of knowledge about language acquisition, was in a division that has had a large percentage of ELL students for many years. Here, they have a strong ESOL program and school personnel understand language acquisition well (P30:14).

### **Parent and Family Characteristics**

The families of ELL children are assessed at the mezzo level of ecological assessment. While many would argue that all family systems are complex, ELL families have a layer of complexity that many do not. Families straddling two countries can mean increased conflict and trauma (especially in the case of refugees), differences in family structure (such as polygamy) and family circumstances, and complicated legal processes that are unknown to non-ELL families (P19:65).

Parents are generally characterized as interested in their child's education but they often face serious barriers to being more involved at school. As an overlap with socioeconomic issues, parents are often struggling in low paying jobs that require long hours and irregular schedules (P19:9; P24:4). Many parents do not speak English; have little formal education; and may not be literate in their first language (P18:27, 30; P19:12; P:21:27). These

factors mean students often do not have the support they require at home to be successful at school.

Social workers are not always able to identify the barriers to working with families, perhaps because we are not always asking families for their input. One social worker said this:

Now that you bring up collaboration, I am interested to know, why are we missing this? The family yesterday, the family had no English, probably legal I don't even know, maybe illegal-they are a married couple. It would be interesting to get *their* perspective. Their kid has been in special education for awhile because he was diagnosed with autism. What is their perspective? Do they think we are a bunch of naggers? Are they planning to earn money and go back to Mexico? Do they care or not about this?(P31:12-13)

This highlights the importance of seeking input from the families in a meaningful way.

### **Socioeconomics**

ELLs can be from any socioeconomic position but it is those who are in poverty, or close to it, who seem to come to the attention of social workers. Problems related to poverty include crowded housing, drugs, and children who “stay at home all day...they don't have any interaction other than in their home” (P22:73). It can explain a lack of parent involvement:

When poverty is an issue, for ESLs or non ESLs, you are more worried about putting a meal on the table than making it to school for a meeting. It isn't that parents don't want to be involved. (P18:128)

During meetings related to consideration for special education, economic disadvantage can be a factor, but participants might be hesitant to use this designation because it rules children out

from receiving services (P22:60, 71).

### **Roles of Potential Supporters**

The people in these roles—professionals, para-professionals, and families—all have the potential to support ELLs in some way. These people are central to resolving the disconnect between the needs of ELLs and gaining access to appropriate resources. Equally important are how the supporters interact amongst themselves.

#### **Social work role**

Social work roles are defined by the school, differing even within divisions. Universally, though, social workers seem to be looking beyond individual functioning and paying the most attention to the student's environment outside of the school. Social workers are often the bridge between family and resources, as both advocates and brokers. Finally, many social workers are concerned that they are stretched thin and not able to proactively be involved with students.

School social workers often conduct assessments that consider dimensions beyond individual functioning and educational ability (the focus of evaluation for special education). One social worker describes her role like this: "That's our job, the psychologists the teachers, others are looking at what is happening in school, we are looking at what's outside of school, beyond the immediate things we can see" (P32:20). While some social workers made home visits, some may not have visited but still thought about what might be happening in the home (P18:58).

Participants were not always explicit about the type of information they were collecting, but the way they referred to their assessments made it clear they were not focused on education ability alone: social history (P23:15); socio-cultural evaluation (P25:10); socio-

cultural assessments (P27:9; P28:18); and socials (P28:39). The assessments include various dimensions from developmental and educational history to home life:

With families...birth and development things, how do they view education? How did parents do in school? Is the child able to go home and study? Are there any resources available to them after school? When did they get here? How did this child do in his own country? And what was the education system like? (P28:29)

Some participants also made assessments that could be used in special education decisions, such as adaptive behavior assessments (P19:44; P21:22; P26:27; P28:18; P32:9). There is nothing in the data to indicate that either the socio-cultural or adaptive assessments are required or important to the special education decision-making process (e.g., P28:39).

As advocates, social workers speak up for the parents and help them understand their role and rights. Sometimes this is not appreciated by other professionals in the school: “I try to be the parent advocate, the team doesn’t like it sometimes, but I tell parents they can get help” (P26:55). The social worker sometimes joins with the family in solidarity (P20:54) or gives information about how to advocate for the student (P26:57).

Sometimes the social worker acts as an advocate as a sort of information interpreter. One social worker noted that she tried to “hear through [the parents] ears” and is particularly alert to jargon used during meetings (P18:52-54). Another noted the difficulty of understanding some of the information and said, “During the meeting I stop and check in with the [parents]” (P20:42). Understanding special educating proceedings can be a challenge for any parent, but is made more difficult with language and culture issues (P25:12). Having a language interpreter present is necessary but one participant expressed concern that some of the information is lost through the interpreter. “We want to let parents feel like they are being

heard, so they can be advocates for their child because they want to be. And I think that gets missed through the interpretation” (P25:18).

As brokers, social workers encourage parents to access school and community resources for their children and family. The socio-cultural and related assessments are usually not integral to the special education decision making process, rather they are used by the social workers to connect the student and family to appropriate resources. “We as social workers are the conduit for funding from community; help families who need clothes, shoes, supplies” (P26:62). Social workers know the community resources and share the information during meetings, assessments, or phone calls (P21: 84; P22:53, 57).

Whether primarily dealing with special education or general education, in the schools or mostly out, in elementary or high schools, in one or many schools, many of the social workers in this study reported feeling unable to complete all the work expected of them. Social workers chair meetings; do paperwork; make home visits; write behavior plans; support teachers; conduct assessments; and engage in a variety of other tasks. While some social workers are assigned to one school, many travel from school to school and one reported splitting 15 schools with a visiting teacher (P25:11). There seems to be no relief in sight:

Next year we are opening 3 new schools, and without a new school social worker position. We all have 3 schools and now we have new ones to cover. We already don’t do the best job we can do because we are so busy. We’re wanted at all 3 every schools every single day and we can’t be (P22:82).

This puts social workers in a position of being reactive, and focused on the negative, instead of proactive (P21:94; P30:12), and can leave them feeling powerless (P21:94).



## **Family role**

While families, parents in particular, want the best for their child, the definition of “best” varies as does their ability to help their child achieve it. This section is almost entirely about parents, but at times a broader definition of family is required. Sometimes the biological parent-child relationship is not entirely clear or known to the school, particularly in the case of polygamy. The family related barriers to reaching the best outcomes for ELL children are great—education levels, language, culture, expectations, and socioeconomic issues.

Language is the most obvious barrier to varying degrees in different divisions, as some divisions have ready access to translators and interpreters. Even in those divisions that are able to call a family or visit with them and speak through an interpreter or send home translated materials, there are still barriers (discussed more under resources). Social workers sometimes feel like they are losing something in the translation and are unable to really connect with the family. “We want to let parents feel like they are being heard, so they can be advocates for their child because they want to be. And I think that gets missed through the interpretation” (P25:18). Parents who do not read and speak English are not able to help their children with homework (P19:30; P24:46). “Some parents have taken English classes and help their children as much as they can” (P19:36). Even more troublesome is written communication. One of the first steps in communicating with family members is usually a note home. A note from the teacher is likely to encounter one of two problems. First, if the note is in English the parent may have no way to read it or may ask one of the other children to read it (P24:48). Second, the school may have the resources to send a note home in the native language but it could still be left unread if the parent is illiterate in her or his first language. Special education related forms may also be only available in English: “We do not

have any translated forms. At one school, it was very difficult to deal with LEP students...it put us in a very disadvantaged position. The parents may not even know what the meeting entails!” (P20:28). A parent, overcoming other barriers, may be present at a meeting and have no way to follow the meeting or even understand why the meeting is being held at all (P25:12). Some parents have been waiting for an opportunity to interact with the school and “they save up all their questions about school so the meetings go really long” (P26:21).

Parents of ELLs involved in the special education process may have low levels of formal education (P18:18). This may mean they are not literate in their first language, making it difficult to help them understand complicated documents even if there is a translation. Engaging the family to provide assistance to the child can be a challenge, too: “If we suggest interventions, they must be extremely concrete, some of the parents may be less educated” (P21:60). Parents with less formal education may also seem to be less willing to engage with the school, perhaps because they do not seem to understand it (P18:48).

As discussed in the section on assessing ELLs, families living at the low socioeconomic status have additional challenges. The biggest hurdle here is that it is difficult to involve families who are working paycheck to paycheck to make ends meet. They simply may not have the time to attend meetings at the school and might not be around to make sure homework is being completed (P19:26; P21:60; P24:48). Poverty may make it logistically difficult to get to school because a family may have limited transportation options (P24:48). A parent’s schedule might even contribute to the problem the child is having:

We spend a lot of time talking to the teachers and saying things like, this mom is working two jobs. Her priority is getting food on the table. Not everyone has the advantages we had growing up. If you have to choose between feeding your children

and getting them to school on time...it explains a lot! (P27-43)

and:

When poverty is an issue, for ESLs or non ESLs, you are more worried about putting a meal on the table than making it to school for a meeting. It isn't that parents don't want to be involved. (P18:128)

The social worker is acutely aware of the problems associated with poverty and the team tries to accommodate families, to some extent:

For special education meetings, the parents *must* come during the day. We are as flexible as possible, meeting first thing in the morning or sometimes on days when meetings aren't normally scheduled but the meetings are still during the day. Parents can participate by phone, or we send papers back and forth (P19:38).

This is an institutional barrier for all parents, but given the added barriers of language and culture, it is difficult to imagine that participation by phone or sending "papers back and forth" is an adequate accommodation and many social workers are frustrated by this.

Surprisingly little attention is given to culture when dealing with ELLs, perhaps because language is such an overwhelming barrier. However, social workers mentioned specific aspects of culture related to advocacy and family boundaries, and understanding special needs (especially mental health needs). Not all parents are able to advocate for their children, particularly in complicated special education processes, but ELL families may have cultural reasons for not advocating for their child. This social worker believes school level discrimination is even worse because Latino families do not culturally understand advocating in a school setting:

Immigrants need to experience belonging to the school community; they feel like they

don't matter. There is still discrimination about who gets suspended or expelled. Most kids here are minorities. To Latinos, it is a foreign concept to advocate. They don't have the time or the knowledge or the money. The squeaky wheel is the one that is heard...when a Latino parent...we need to make the system more fair. (P21:90)

Sometimes parents may not understand that they may advocate. They may not know their rights. "Parents have rights, but they just do whatever is going on in the meeting" (P20:36). "The parents aren't pushing for the child's needs to be met" (P26:47).

ELL families may be closed systems (P20:38), which may be related to culture or to the immigrant experience. There is variation, of course, just as there is in non-ELL families, and "[s]ome families are open, but they want to vent that their child is out of control. They don't really want help making changes" (P21:58).

Special needs are understood differently in different cultures so explaining problems with a child, especially if a mental health problem, can be a challenge for social workers. "Korean families are very responsive, but the perception of mental health problems...suggestions of services aren't so welcome" (P21:62). Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a fairly common diagnosis, can be difficult to explain to parents and may even be met with negativity:

Sometimes ELL families are not familiar with ADHD. I have handouts from NICHY, the handouts are in Spanish; some parents have never heard of it. We meet in a committee and try to explain it, but I also meet one on one with the families. I ask about daily living: how does the child deal with distraction? How does the child follow multiple levels of instructions? The other major cultural group where we deal with this being unfamiliar, or not being accepted, is (sic) the Korean families.

Sometimes parents are the barriers. Sometimes it is hard to tell Korean families about ADHD. They say, “He’s just lazy.” The parents are immediately putting a negative valance on the child. (P23:15)

Some families do not want to acknowledge mental health needs. This family was particularly challenging for one social worker:

I’ve dealt a lot with families from Sierra Leone. It is so hard; the problems are so hard.... There just are not the resources needed for these families. One woman came here at 15; she had experienced so much trauma. She is now in her 20’s and is the mother of 4 and her children have struggles. I was glad to hear at the high school she went to there was a peer group for people with similar experiences, but that was it. One of her children is very anxious. But she is so much not wanting to go there, not wanting to connect the dots between her experience and her kids today. One parent- I’ve heard this many times-threatened to send the child back. I know one with ADHD who did get sent back to Sierra Leone as punishment. One mother was not even willing to have a dialogue with the school. There is a bigger problem in working with the families (P23:25).

It is not possible to say from these descriptions alone that this is simply a negative cultural understanding of mental health, but that is certainly one approach to understanding the resistance to help around this issue. While returning a child to his home country as “punishment” may seem extreme, it is just as frustrating to social workers to have resources to offer—or, at the very least, information—and have that refused or ignored. Sometimes, a parent’s own mental health needs may interfere with understanding the needs of the child (P23:27).

Participants in this study think families want the best for their child but recognize there are barriers to achieving that. However, there are also differences in what “best” means. For some parents there is a disconnect between what they want and what they are able to provide in that “most of these parents value education, they want their children to do well but they can’t support them” (P19:34). One social worker is not sure if ELL parents really want “the best” for their children. “I think they want their kids to do better, all parents do, but I don’t know...I don’t know graduation rates of ELLs” (P24:39). Another social worker sees a range of interest in education, but a universal belief that our children should be cared for:

We see such a range of parents, they have the same wants for their child whether they are fluent in English or not. To some Hispanic parents education is not important, but to some it is very important. They just want people to care for their children. It’s what we all want (P25:34).

Based on the family history, expectations might be very low as some parents “are happy there kid isn’t being beaten at school” (P26:48). The bottom line is “[t]he parents care; they want their children to do well, but they have difficulties being involved...but some are more involved than expected” (P18:50).

Notably in this section, though it holds in others as well, this is from social workers perspectives and not the families themselves:

...The family yesterday, the family had no English, probably legal I don’t even know, maybe illegal-they are a married couple. It would be interesting to get *their* perspective. Their kid has been in special education for awhile because he was diagnosed with autism.

What is their perspective? Do they think we are a bunch of naggers? Are they planning

to earn money and go back to Mexico? Do they care or not about this?...I would be really interested in what do *they* think? What do they think would be really helpful? Education is not necessarily a priority in their country, and here we are nagging about SOLs. They don't necessarily have the right nutrition; they don't have the prenatal care; they don't have a good foundation and we are nagging about SOLs? (P31:13-15)

In most cases, the family is expected to participate but to what end? If they are able to overcome barriers to attend meetings, is their role limited?

### **Teachers**

Social workers view the teacher's role as primarily to instruct students but they also wish they more understood the scope of problems an ELL student may face. They want teachers to better understand language acquisition (e.g., P18:22-24; P22:84), trauma, and even information included in student assessments:

And I think every teacher needs to read every kids file. I understand they are pressed for time, but there is helpful information in there. They would learn the family history, family dynamics, health problems...not all files have these things, but many do (P19:96).

Teachers are sometimes seen as unavailable and uncommitted (P19:94; P24:64) but in another division they are described as "passionate about teaching" (P22:10) and as the "soldiers on the ground" (P30:15).

Teachers are mostly viewed from a place of empathy for the tremendous pressure put upon them (P22:43). Classroom size is too big (P20:52); they don't have the parent involvement they would like to have (P24:48); and the demands of the SOLs are too much (e.g., P18:82):

Good teachers are able to differentiate between kid's needs. Many teachers accountability-wise are in fear of losing jobs. I've watched things change but the stress...even slow learners who are not really slow learners stress the teachers more than ever (P27:31).

Teachers “worry about the child in two or three years, but they also worry about their own teaching and how they will be perceived” (P24:61). The interaction between social workers and students is often minimal, usually limited to intervening in behavior issues, information gathering, and attending team meetings. The general education classroom teacher usually seeks help for academic issues from an ESOL teacher (if available) or an instructional team, particularly if RTI has been implemented at the school.

The primary area of criticism of classroom teachers is that they often push for a special education designation (P18:82-88, 94; P22:65; P24:53, 59; P25: 40; P30:10). This is usually viewed as a reaction to NCLB related pressure. Social workers are concerned that the frustration and pressure general education teachers are feeling will result in ELL children being over-represented in special education. This disproportional representation is a problem under NCLB, and can create negative consequences for the child as well.

### **ESOL Teachers**

ESOL teachers—when available—usually play an important role in the academic lives of ELL students. This varies, of course, from school to school. While some divisions describe very little interaction with an ESOL teacher, particularly where there is only one in the county (P25:13), larger districts with higher percentages of ELLs have as many as five ESOL teachers in a school (P23:5). As can be expected, as the number of ELL students grow in a division so do the number of ESOL teachers, in some cases doubling or even quadrupling



from a ½ time to 4 full time ESOL teachers (P26:4).

ESOL teachers are usually good resources for social workers and for ELL families and they are able to meet the needs of most ELL students. Many ESOL teachers—but certainly not all—share a common language with ELL families. Because of this “[t]he families tend to work more with ELL teachers and ELL teachers can sometimes speak different languages, so they can help with some of the students directly” (P26:29). There are limitations, of course. ESOL teachers are not qualified to identify a special need (P26:43) and sometimes even refer children for evaluation when more could be done in the classroom (P22:37; P26:49). Some may not even understand language acquisition (P22:84; 24:47).

They are also aware of differences in learning among ELLs such as a child who is not moving through the levels the way she should be (P26:46). They are often the first to notice a problem and they often intervene:

I feel like ESOL teachers are the biggest interveners. They really want to look at the big picture; they want to understand more. They are really good; they became ESOL teachers because they care. They are the first line (P23:37).

While the social worker might be consulted for behavior issues, ESOL teachers tend to work in conjunction with the general education teachers when there is an academic problem:

When there seems to be a learning problem, the teachers are more likely to go to the ESOL teacher. They might ask for strategies to help the child in the regular classroom. Essentially, the ESOL teacher and the teacher “share” the kids. If the issues are health impairments, behavioral or attention problems the teacher will probably talk to me, looking for strategies to use with the student (P23:13).

An ESOL teacher may intervene for years before making a referral for special education:

The ESOL teachers are very involved; they have probably already been doing a lot of interventions. They do a lot especially around teaching the children to read and write English, which is their main focus. By the time these children are considered for special ed, they have usually had 2-3yrs of ESOL classes (P23:7).

Once they are referred for special education, social workers recognize that the ESOL classroom might still best be able to meet the needs of the child:

One of the problems is-does the child need special ed to get through school? The instruction they get in the ELL program is very good. It might be better than special ed unless a child is really retarded or needs functional skills (P26:32).

Social workers see the ESOL teachers as having a very important role in helping ELL students and perceive the relationship between ESOL teachers and general education teachers as a very important one.

### **Administrators**

Descriptions of administrators and their understanding of ELLs are decidedly mixed. Some are viewed as partners in the process, knowledgeable about ELLs and special education and, to some extent, the overlap between the needs of ELLs and special education. Because social workers often work in multiple schools they can see the differences even from school to school, one social worker describing each school as having “its own personality” (P19:59). Administrators are important to creating the right climate (P23:31), but are not always able to do so. Sometimes there is a large gap between the work and understanding of the teachers and the administrators:

One thing I have to say we have students who get in so much trouble what we have seen again and again teachers understand the problems, but administrators don't...In

the schools, teachers are the soldiers on the ground they know they understand but at higher levels-not so much (P30:15).

One principal is described as over-involved in special education decisions, “badger[ing]” one family into having their child evaluated (P22:67). Principals are under a great deal of pressure from the NCLB policy and sometimes push for services because of this. On the other hand, because disproportional representation is a concern they want to get the ratios of ELLs in special education right. Sometimes the principal can be a roadblock to the process, such as one who does not want families to have interpreters (P24:13). Others are very supportive and encourage team members to make independent decisions without worrying about disparity (P26:56).

### **Interpreters and translators**

There is great availability of interpreters and, to a lesser extent, translated documents particularly for Spanish language speakers. In some cases, it is as easy as making a phone call or filling out a form and services are available quickly. Not having access to an interpreter or not knowing how to use one can make dealing with parents—and students—difficult.

A couple school divisions have hired native speaking liaisons for ELL families, though that can create problems, too.

Typically liaison is a Spanish speaker. We have one who speaks Kurdish and Arabic. One who speaks Russian. They are in all 8 schools. When a child gets sick the liaison picks up the phone and calls parents. But instead of just being a liaison and transferring information back and forth, they are now being asked to do things that social workers might do. They don’t have the education or training to do that. (P27:37)

The liaisons are not social workers and sometimes have overstepped boundaries in terms of

how information is filtered and shared (P30:13).

Interpreters are viewed as helpful, but also a barrier to the relationship a social worker can have with a family:

We always use interpreters who are highly trained, but none are social workers...It is such a barrier and I find that a tremendous barrier to social work services. Sharing your story is impeded by using as an interpreter. They are good, but there is still a concern that something is lost in the translation. (P27:14, 24)

Some social workers are trained to work with interpreters and some are not, which means there is probably great variety in the type and manner in which information is obtained from families. “Using interpreters is second nature. We have trained interpreters through [a local university] and they have even been trained on education and special education terminology” (P18:42). A social worker from a division with a low ELL population wants to learn how to use an interpreter. “Being more experienced with the interpreter would help me,” she said, “it is hard to know what I should do; where I should look; how I should talk” (P25:17).

Spanish is the predominant language, after English, in most divisions with ELLs and Spanish interpreters and translations are relatively common. One of the challenges with lesser spoken languages is finding interpreters (P26:21). Or, the available interpreter might not be an ideal choice:

We don’t have interpreters for every language and there are some interpreters who I won’t use. There is one interpreter for one language and I will never use her again-but she is the only one for that language. [half laughs] I guess I will use her again, but I will do everything I can to avoid it. (P19:46)

While having interpreter services is important, the lack of translated documents—particularly

those related to the complicated special education process—is worrisome. “We do not have any translated forms. At one school, it was very difficult to deal with LEP students...it put us in a very disadvantaged position. The parents may not even know what the meeting entails!” (P20:28).

Most social workers believe having bilingual staff, or being bilingual would be an advantage to working with ELL students. This could improve relationships with parents, but it could also make a difference to students:

Having dual language people in each school is almost a requirement. Someone needs to be able to communicate to them. A lot of our teachers have basic functional Spanish words, but sometimes we end up with behavior problems that are just because of misunderstanding (P27:58).

Having dual language personnel is not enough. Social workers who are bilingual have an advantage, at least when they are communicating with students and families who speak their language. Having a bilingual person or two on staff is not enough:

What I’m thinking is for those professionals who are not bilingual, they need a translator to call the family. They need the ability to speak the language. In my school almost 60% speak Spanish so it is easy for me to communicate. But when I have to contact a Somali family, that is much harder. I think the intent is to have very good communication with the families; there are language barriers; there is a lack of time(P30:12).

There are no easy answers. Some divisions have dozens and dozens of languages represented and it would be impossible to have someone on staff who is fluent in each of those languages.

## **Psychologists**

In most schools, the psychologist is responsible for special education related assessments and is less “hands on” with the students and families than the social worker. A couple of the psychologists are bilingual and able to conduct bilingual assessments with ELL students who speak the same language. Relationships between the social worker and the psychologist range from fantastic:

We work very closely with the school psychologists. We are in the same building. We exchange a lot of information. We are usually evaluating the same child; we compare notes a lot; a lot of times we go to meetings together. We have 12-14 meetings a week so we split them. Our psychologists are excellent. They use non-language based testing; they are very up to date; they really try to get the most accurate assessment (P25:32-33).

and:

The professional collaborative experience is wonderful. The school psychologist and I work well together...the school counselors-the counselors handle the general situations; I carry the heavy duty cases. The psychologist is in the high school only one day a week. That role is less hands on (P21:82).

to terrible:

Some of the psychologists have superiority complexes. Maybe it is the way they are socialized in school? Sometimes they dominate team meetings; but it varies from school to school. People quickly see there isn't just one way to understand things (P23:51).

“The psychologist is seen as the expert. The social worker as resource gathering...” (P21:84)

and “[t]he psychologist usually runs the show” (P19:50). One social worker saw herself as “an extension of the school psychologist” (P25:30). Often, the social worker and psychologist present a united front to others involved in the meeting (P26:57; P22:39, 41)

### **Interactions between the decision-makers**

There are many opportunities for interaction among school personnel and between school personnel and families. While the explanation of the roles of professionals and families describes some of these interactions, this code focuses on those interactions that are more formalized and among more than two people. Informal interactions are often based on relationships and are usually around solutions to academic problems [e.g., a general education teacher and ESOL teacher collaborate on instructional changes in the classroom (P23:13)]. Formal interactions are group meetings held to address some aspect of a student’s academic progress, including behavioral or emotional problems that may be interfering with academic progress. Different divisions and schools have different processes around more formal team meetings. These meetings can come anywhere in the process, from before a referral, e.g., a classroom instruction related RTI meeting (P23:35), at referral, e.g., an evaluation team (P25:9) or somewhere in between, e.g., a child study meeting (P18:94).

These meetings sound generally collegial, with everyone knowing their assigned roles which differ from division to division. Families, though, do not usually know their assigned role and may require assistance from someone to help them understand. Although it is not specifically related to ELL students, some social workers make an effort to address jargon that is used at the meeting. Some meetings, particularly evaluation team meetings, may be dominated by the psychologist reporting assessment results, while others are “mostly teacher and parent input” (P20:12).

In early iterations of this research, the interactions between social workers and other professionals, particularly teachers, seemed to be the key process. This association did not hold with the data as analyzed or with the participants upon member checking. Interestingly, collaboration seems nearly absent. This does not mean people are not working together at all—they share their expertise but stick to their roles rather than reach out to develop new approaches to dealing with problems in a truly integrated way.

### **The Special Education Process**

At the crux of how social workers and other school personnel identify the needs of ELLs is how assessment and evaluation is made. A social worker can approach this using an ecological perspective that would provide the information we need to match resources to needs. Social workers will use different approaches from this point—perhaps strengths based, perhaps empowerment—and different techniques and interventions to address problems. Without that initial assessment there is no way to move forward—at least, there should not be forward movement, but there is.

### **Pre-referral interventions**

Before a request is made for a child to be evaluated for special education services, most schools intervene in some way. Some schools have a formal process, called Response to Intervention (RTI) in place. Other schools have a less formal process of implementing instructional changes. The emphasis here is on classroom instruction, as the goal of any intervention is to improve academic outcomes. Classroom teachers may receive support and ideas about instructional techniques for their classroom as a whole. The instructional support teams do not usually include a social worker. Sometimes, the interventions are child specific, such as a behavior modification plan. Depending on the resources of the school, during this



pre-referral time, professionals involved in interventions could include the social worker, the general education teacher, the ESOL teacher, and/or the Title I teacher.

The pre-referral intervention stage does not have a fixed time period. One social worker talked of trying interventions “at least for 6 weeks” before evaluating for special education (P28:14). Some divisions have years long—as many as 5 (P30:8)—informally imposed “waiting periods” on referring ELLs to special education in order to allow ELLs to learn the language and try other strategies to improve academic performance (P22:32-33; P23:7; P26:54; P28:5; P32:18). The range of times speaks to the range of how and when interventions are used and does not necessarily indicate that some divisions are quick to refer ELLs to special education. Some schools rely heavily on interventions in ESOL classrooms and consider those services to be better than anything that could be provided in special education, unless the child actually has a special need. Others use classroom techniques generally and more targeted RTI techniques for shorter time periods.

### **Referrals to special education**

Referrals are necessarily related to a potential disability. Through assessment and with input from a multi-disciplinary team a decision is made about the presence of a disability. But what about referrals made when there is a potential disability, but it has very little potential of being a “real” disability? In other words, what about referrals that are made because a social worker, or other person making the referral, believes this is the only way the child might get services they cannot otherwise access. In some divisions and to some social workers, this idea is anathema to the way they operate. To some, this might be the best way to get services to a child in need, even if that need is not quite a disability.

One social worker in particular spoke about this kind of need for services in anyway

one could find it:

Sometimes, a child might be working as hard as they can. Maybe they need just a little extra help. The only way for them to get it is being identified as special ed. It can be a benevolent decision to try to identify them as in need of special ed. We know as a committee that this child needs help. Sometimes the psychologist can find a way to make it work. The child is trying; the family is trying; they just need a different setting and different services to make it work, to make improvement. It's possible they won't need special ed after a few years; they are reassessed...but they usually continue to qualify. There are definitely kids you want to find eligible and when you can't you say, "Dang!" (P19:77)

She put special education identification in the context of the experiences of the families.

"Many of them have been through horrors we can't begin to imagine. So if their child is in special education, it isn't a big deal. It doesn't mean you won't qualify for a job. No job asks, are you LD?" (P19:108). Another, when asked about the idea of a benevolent referral said, "I am a pragmatist. If I can make a referral so a child gets services...if the kid needs help and can get help..." (P23:47). She trailed off at that point, not putting words to a tough decision about finding resources. One participant said, "Teachers with the demands of the SOLs sometimes jump to the resources, jump to referral because it is the only option, especially those that enter at 14 or 15" (P30:4). Social workers are aware that there is negative stigma and other downsides to special education (e.g., P18:86-90;P24:21) ; but they might see it as a logical approach to finding services.

A social worker noted that referrals from teachers from a particular school (among the multiple schools she worked at) seemed to understand ELLs and their needs well enough to

identify “real concerns” (P24:81). Another aligns herself with the psychologist as a gatekeeper of sorts to explain to teachers why a child should not be referred for special education (P22:47). Schools with ESOL programs could account for some learning problems by comparing expected outcomes in language to performance (P26:31). Referrals made for physical disabilities or disabilities that are diagnosed by objective measures were also mentioned in passing (e.g., P28:9, 20) but not discussed much by the participants.

### **Special Education Assessment**

When a child is referred for special education evaluation, a variety of assessments are made of the child’s ability. The school psychologist generally conducts the assessments (P23:11; P24:51; P25:8), though sometimes the special education teacher has a role in conducting the assessment (P28: 19). Other reports, such as a socio-cultural assessment, might be done by the social worker (P32:19).

The divisions report a wide array of assessment strategies including verbal and non-verbal tests, in English and in other languages, and adaptive behavior assessments. Some of the assessments have been translated into Spanish but no other languages, making it difficult to assess non-Spanish speaking ELLs (P19:44). The variety in approaches can make things difficult:

Sometimes they will do a bilingual assessment. That should be standard for most ELL children especially those on a level 1 or 2. When the psychologists who don’t speak Spanish, they have an interpreter interpret the questions they miss, not the whole assessment. The assessments are then not standardized because they are not given in a standardized way, so we have to describe it which is tricky. It’s easier when you have a score (P22:79).

Other divisions have had time to develop normed assessments:

We use really good expressive/receptive language tests. They have developed normative comparisons. It is a normed Peabody test. They are compared to other ELLs with similar characteristics...time in country; compared to other ELLs, are they doing greater than expected, as expected, or less than expected? That is really good information to have. So my perspective is informed by really rich resources, the resources the children receive when they arrive (P23:9).

This did not happen overnight, of course:

Previously they were tested for special ed in English despite language ability and many children were placed in SpED using the English tests...The psychologists now test and use the Ortiz matrix which helps to tease out language differences/problems and fewer are being labeled with disabilities (P18:15,17).

and, in another division:

We have reevaluated children who were not using the [Ortiz] matrix. They were evaluated before the matrix, so the special ed director said they needed to be redone. And some have stayed in and come out. All our kids who are bilingual have been matrixed. It took us 3 or 4 years (P27:34).

### **Special Education Eligibility**

While some social workers are clear that a child is only identified as a person in need of assistance if clear criteria are met (P23:11; P24:60), most acknowledge some personal judgment playing a role in whether or not a student qualifies for special education services. “It seems to me they are able to tease out the kids who really do have differences in processing information” (P23:11). While all schools seemed to rely heavily on assessments, there were

still “heated discussion[s]” (P28:24) and “exceptions” even in schools with clear criteria for qualification (P23:11). Evaluation teams sometimes feel compelled to find ELL students eligible for special education: “There is great pressure to identify kids as special ed, all kids not just ELLs. An ELL just sticks out like a sore thumb as someone to identify” (P24:57).

Sometimes the message is mixed:

We don’t let concern about disparity hinder any decisions. Over and over the principal says “do not let that cloud your decisions.” But with the special ed coordinator saying, “no” I have to wonder if that is a problem.(P26:56).

In the case of disabilities that can be diagnosed by a medical doctor, such as spina bifida or blindness, there is no gray area. For those with other special needs—most prominently learning disabilities or behavior problems—child study teams sometimes wrestle with the results of evaluations. Social workers and other professionals sometimes wonder about the root of the problem, such as language or socioeconomic factors, and whether or not that should disqualify someone from receiving special education services. Finally, related to the concept of benevolent referrals, there are benevolent eligibilities: “Sometimes people justify a small discrepancy as someone needing services” (P30:6).

### **Stigma of Disability Label**

Despite the inclination to help a child get resources in any way they can (see benevolent referrals), there is a negative side to being qualified for special education when it is not absolutely necessary. There is concern that teachers refer to special education because they see identification as a “perk” (P18:88). Entering special education “changes the school trajectory” (P18:90) and “you end up with a substandard education” (P24:53). Social workers are concerned that because qualifying a child for special education means the child is labeled

as having a disability, that label and associated stigma will stay with students into adulthood (P24:53). “[S]pecial education last forever!” (P24:21). Social workers view identification when it is not required as unethical (P18:86) and one stated “it probably is better if children are not identified for special ed” (P32:10). When there is concern about a child receiving appropriate resources, needs should be met with “accurate labeling” (P18:144). To many social workers, special education is meant for children with a disability, not as a last resort for resources.

### **Disproportional representation**

The disproportional representation of ELLs in special education was the original problem of this research. Yet, the research yielded very little data on this topic. Social workers were aware that it could be a problem and some knew their divisions had been identified as a division that had a problem with disproportionality. “We have been told by report from the feds that we are not identifying enough kids, we are very sensitive to this” (P24:6). The confidence that social workers have in whether they are identifying ELLs who truly have special needs seems to be at least somewhat related to the length of time the division has had and the percentage of ELLs the division serves.

Divisions with newer and smaller ELL populations talked about over-identifying, even if they could not quite say why. “I do think ELLs are over-referred, but I don’t know why” (P19:59). Another says, “[my] struggle is, are we over-identifying children for special ed?” (P21:44). In one division, the social worker worries that they will be “flagged” for over-identifying, but does not express concern that they actually are (P22:20). On the other hand, schools with larger populations sometimes seem “cautious” (P30:7) and “very reluctant to enter the special education process until the student is in the county for at least five years”

(P30:8). One participant feels like they are being “picked on for not identifying enough” (P24:83).

In the first 10 years or so we probably misidentified--not on purpose! ...As a social worker one of the things most frustrating prior to Samuel Ortiz, the matrix system, before we had the matrix we were probably over identifying (P27:6, 10).

As schools learn more about ELLs, develop better resources, and their evaluation procedures evolve, perhaps disproportionality is less likely.

## **Resources**

### **Available resources**

While social workers in most divisions struggle with finding services and other resources, some social workers report adequate resource availability, or at least adequate resources for specific needs. Churches, the Red Cross, multi-cultural human service agencies, universities, government agencies, and other non-profits all provide some services. One social worker said, “I see our community being more involved with school, partnering; a number of human services agencies doing more about partnering and understanding the differences.” She acknowledges, “We are very different” (P27:45). Immediate, obvious disability needs are generally met, such as for children who need wheelchairs (P26:51).

In what might be a sign of preparing for an influx of immigrants, there seems to be an increase in services to very young ELL children in some divisions. Before a child starts school, he may have disability issues addressed through early intervention. “It is interesting; a lot of people do get early baby check-ups. A good amount are (sic) referred to early intervention, PACE. Alot of pediatricians see babies. We get a good amount seen by the early intervention program” (P24:42). Public preschool programs are facing ELL students head on:

This summer I worked with the preschool program. Their process is so much more streamlined and better because they are used to this. They set up the appointments with an interpreter. It works really well. If they are Hispanic speaking they are automatically eligible. Evidently they are seeing more at that level. Some families were ESL families. Some were Hispanic people, but they spoke English-there are some, but not like that they have a lot of contact (P28:36).

A social worker from another growing division says, “Our preschool population is booming... The vast majority of the students come from families where English is a second language” (P27:22).

### **Inappropriate Or Inaccessible Resources**

Even when resources are available to ELL students and their families, there are potential mismatches or roadblocks to accessing services. There can be a mismatch of available services in terms of language and culture. Some communities are “trying to provide more services, but language gets in the way” (P27:48). Even community resources that are billed as bilingual or bicultural are not necessarily so. One bilingual/bicultural social worker said, “[t]he provision of services to Latinos is offensive, the ‘bilingual’ services aren’t really bilingual, they aren’t bicultural even if the community is billing it that way” (P21:66). Services may also be inaccessible, particularly due to legal status of the child or family member.

The primary barrier to receiving services is the legal documentation, or authorization of residence in the United States, of the child, parents, or both. Documentation can include permanent residence status or temporary permits (such as for work or school), which can be overstayed resulting in a switch from legal to illegal residence. Sometimes a child, because



she was born here, qualifies for services but the parents are reluctant to access them because of their legal status (P18:64; P21:78):

This makes many families uncomfortable with applying even if the legal status of children makes them qualify but they are scared to apply. Schools don't care about legal status. We do from my perspective because of how they are functioning.

Children have ended up in foster care system as parents are removed. (P27:50)

A child may not qualify for services because of his own documentation status. "It is absolutely heartbreaking when a child can't get services because of legal status-I think 'Really? There is no way for him to get Medicaid?'" (P18:66). Social workers have seen this change over time:

My main role at this school is finding community resources. Many students or family members are not documented but they need food, or rental assistance, or utility assistance...4 years ago it was a lot easier. Places did not check ID's or otherwise inquire about documentation, so resources were easier to find. (P22:35)

Social workers are often frustrated that they cannot access resources; but they cannot require the parents to apply for services.

### **Absence of Community Resources**

Even in divisions with adequate funding, extensive and ELL appropriate evaluation systems in place, there is still a need for more resources and services—and that need is felt more acutely in areas with new immigrant growth. Bilingual services of any kind are sparse. ELL students and their families need access to mental health services, adequate health care, and English classes. After school and preschool programs are also needed.

Mental health services are an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to

addressing trauma related and other emotional needs of ELL students. But bilingual mental health services are largely missing, even in high immigrant areas. Schools are not able to provide mental health services. Indeed, social workers may be specifically advised to only provide educationally focused counseling:

Trauma is an issue in ELL families. It is very complex. The way schools are funded...they are not funded and set up to be centers of healing. The resources have been removed or reduced for treating kids with emotional problems. Social workers and psychologists are only allowed to provide counseling on very specific IEP issues. We are told we are not providing therapy; counseling is specifically educationally focused. The counseling is to reach the goals of staying in school and being able to access the curriculum. It is a very narrow focus. I don't know if there isn't money or a philosophical decision not to support healing. The best we can do is provide referrals to private and public services. (P23:19)

This social worker goes on to describe her effort at getting a child services outside the school:

I have two very depressed children. *Very* depressed. They have Medicaid. I encouraged the family to call to make appointments and they did. Well, they were given an intake and put on a waiting list. They were told they might be seen in the summertime. The counselor and I threw up our hands. It makes me reflect on mental health services in this country. Don't be poor and have a mental health problem. You can't rely on Medicaid. With the families, even if they make the initial calls, there is a loss of momentum for treatment. We need advocacy in this area. (P23:21)

Due to their complicated histories and potential for experiences of trauma, ELL children should have access to mental health practitioners with the most experience, but this is not

what happens (P21:70).

The social workers in this study had lists of resources they thought could improve the lives of ELL students. They talked about curriculum based daycare (P24:36), after school programs (P19:73, 94; P24:77; P28:32), and English classes (P28:41). Even when documentation or other barriers are not a problem, quality health care may be out of reach for ELLs.

There definitely need to be more community resources. After school programs would be nice; medical care is a big one. Many of our ELL students don't have insurance or have Medicaid. People with Medicaid have access to very few doctors of quality.

Sometimes I see their records and I cringe. Ugh, can't you find a different doctor? But

I know it's limited. They don't have many-or good--choices. (P19:73)

Even an available resource—such as a free clinic—is not necessarily adequate as it may not provide medicine (P18:66). Social workers ideally want to find culturally appropriate services for their clients (P24:66), but for this population they sometimes struggle to find any services at all.

### **The Grounded Theory**

Supporting ELLs is the core variable that resolves the disconnect between the needs of ELLs and the availability of resources. The context (division characteristics, policy, discrimination and prejudice) contribute to the availability of appropriate in-school resources, such as ESOL teachers, and interpreters and translators. The context is also related to the perceptions and knowledge of ELLs of the professional staff. The ELL characteristics and circumstances (trauma, language acquisition, family characteristics, and socio-economics) are integral in understanding both the ELL as an individual and the family. The school

professionals, with the exception of psychologists who are often not involved until the student is somehow engaged with the special education system, make an effort to connect the student to resources to meet their needs. The resources are often inappropriate, inaccessible, or simply unavailable. The unavailability of appropriate and accessible resources sometimes results in referrals to special education.

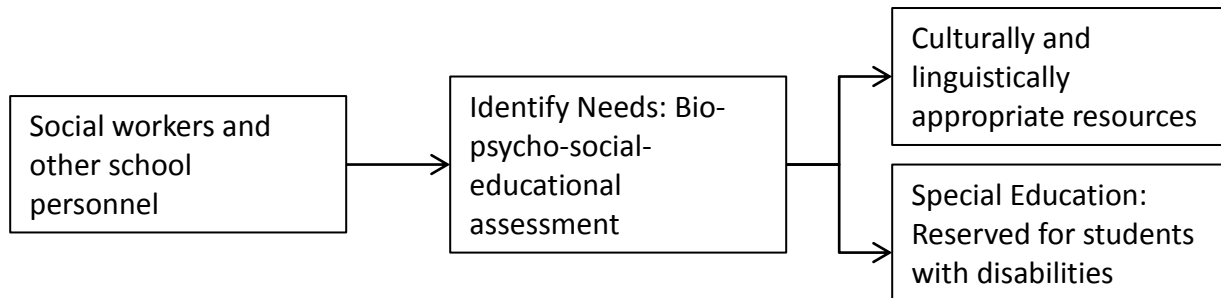


Figure 3: The Grounded Theory

This grounded theory suggests social workers and other school personnel can support ELLs and avoid an inappropriate referral to special education through: (1) culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment outside of the special education process, with particular attention to needs related to trauma and language acquisition; and (2) connection to available culturally and linguistically appropriate resources to meet the identified needs. Participants in this study were always interested in supporting ELLs, but when ELL student needs are not properly assessed or the required resources are not available, social workers and others involved sometimes felt they had no choice but to make referrals to special education. In other words, in order to solve the disconnect between needs of ELLs and the available and appropriate resources (the main concern), social workers would do anything they could to support ELLs (the core variable) including participating in the creation of disproportionality.

Culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment means collecting and evaluating information about an ELL student from an ecological perspective, using a culturally competent perspective with translation and interpretation services as necessary. This includes the bio-psycho-social perspective of the social worker, and could include the psychological perspective of the psychologist (though, in this study, the psychologist was not normally involved in the assessment process until after a special education referral). It also includes educational assessment by other school personnel, with special attention to input from ESOL teachers because of their understanding of language acquisition. Particular attention in this process is given to experienced trauma that may manifest itself as emotional or behavioral difficulties, and to the process of language acquisition which may manifest itself as learning difficulties and contribute to emotional or behavioral problems.

Without a full understanding of language acquisition, school personnel may be hesitant to—or even advised against—make a referral to special education. While this may allow some children time to learn the language following the normal steps of language acquisition, others may be left behind because of the presence of undiagnosed learning disabilities. This may have the unintended consequence of contributing to the under-representation of ELLs in special education.

Once an assessment is made, the next step is to connect ELL students to available appropriate resources. Available resources are those that can accommodate the ELL students and families in regards to location, payment options, and accessible even to students or families without legal documentation. These resources need to be available in the language the ELL student the family feel most comfortable speaking. Finally, the resources must be

culturally appropriate, meaning practitioners must be able to demonstrate at least cultural sensitivity.

## Chapter Five: Findings and Implications

This study advances the knowledge about the social work perspective on English language learners (ELLs) entering special education. The main concern of the participants in this study is *the disconnect between the needs of ELLs and the resources available to them*. The resolution to this concern, the core variable, is *supporting ELLs*. Limited availability of appropriate, accessible resources causes ELL student needs to be unmet or minimally met and results in their disproportional representation in special education. People in supporting roles, including social workers, teachers and other school personnel, and family, struggle to piece together the available resources. Further, assessments are often not conducted prior to referral to special education; meaning needs are often not even identified until that point.

The school system's focus is ensuring students meet educational goals, particularly under NCLB. On the face of it, this makes sense: the goal of school is to educate students. It is not, as one participant said, designed to be a place of healing. To the school system, the problem with ELLS is by ignoring, minimizing, or, more commonly, not identifying the underlying causes of the problems or identifying and not being able to appropriately address the problems, the student does not meet educational goals. This is certainly a failure on behalf of the individual ELL student; but it also contributes to the frustration that school personnel feel in not being able to meet AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) or otherwise being able to meet the standards of NCLB.

To social workers, the problem with not assessing or addressing the needs of ELL students means the problem becomes much bigger. Not only is the student unable to meet educational goals, the student has several other unmet needs. There is a tension for social workers in a host agency, such as a school, where the goal is one-fold (meeting educational

outcomes) but the social worker professional goal is meeting the needs using ecological more holistic approach which addresses needs and strengths at all systems levels (micro, mezzo, and macro) and attends to multiple types of functioning (bio-psycho-social-spiritual).

This is not to suggest individual administrators, teachers, and other school personnel are callous to the needs of ELLs because they are solely focused on education. Indeed, they are frustrated, too. Teachers are frustrated in the classroom when an ELL student behaves in a way that is disruptive to the class and may seek help from an instructional assistance team with classroom management techniques. If this fails, a social worker may step in; conduct a bio-psycho-social assessment; and note that the behaviors likely stem from trauma experienced during inter-country transition coupled with parents who work long, erratic hours. But then what? Are there culturally appropriate resources available for the student? Are they available to the student if he is not legally residing in the United States? And who will transport him to appointments?

### **Key Findings**

There were six dimensions originally proposed for this study: the needs of ELLs; engaging families of ELLs; community connections; professional setting; special education process; and social work. Because the grounded theory process requires the researcher to whittle down the scope of a grounded theory topic to a main concern and the core variable, I expected to conclude this study with a focus on one or two dimensions. That is not what happened. Instead, the main concern straddles the dimensions of community connections and the needs of ELLs, and the resolving variable of *supporting ELLs* cuts across all dimensions (see Figure 2, p. 91).



Two dimensions are added to the original six: the school setting and the policy context. These dimensions were included initially as elements of the dimensions but not as stand-alone topics. The school setting was woven into all the dimensions and incorporated into the needs of ELLs dimension. Policy was included in two sections, the needs of ELLs and the special education process. Both topics proved important enough to be thought about as individual categories.

### **The School Setting**

Previous research indicates negative factors associated with high ELL population schools, including larger class sizes, higher poverty rates, and lower quality teachers (de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005). Those are measurable characteristics that were not originally included in this study. However, participants in this study from higher ELL schools indicated more robust practices for intervention and assessment with ELLs, and more access to culturally and linguistically appropriate resources were needed.

The characteristics and experiences of school divisions are wide ranging, but none had perfected support for ELLs. Social workers from some divisions report coming in to contact with just a handful of ELL students and their families, while others are in divisions where ELLs are a large percentage of the population. In some divisions, Spanish is the only first language and in others there are over 100 first languages. Yet all the participants in the study report the need for improvement in some area of school support for ELLs.

### **The Policy Context**

It seems that the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* is restricting the ability of school personnel to meet the needs of ELL students. Social workers see teachers and administrators under such great pressure to make adequate yearly progress that they are sometimes afraid for

their jobs. Because ELL students might bring down on AYP, they are sometimes inappropriately referred to special education, rather than have their needs met while in the regular classroom, thus preventing their scores from negatively impacting the classroom average. There are, however, leniencies in the law to allow ELL students to delay or modify tests; but social workers do not believe these are adequate to allow time for academic language acquisition or to address other needs of ELLs.

### **The Needs of ELLs**

Social workers mentioned trauma as a key area of concern, particularly in understanding behaviors and emotional problems in ELLs. As the initial literature review established, ELLs experience higher rates of psychological problems (e.g., Capps & Fortuny, 2006) but this is not necessarily linked to trauma. The underlying cause of the problems participants see in ELLs could also be acculturative stress (McBrien, 2004) or differential acculturation (Tapia, Schwartz, Prado, Lopez, & Pantin, 2006), which were not mentioned by participants in this study.

Understanding language acquisition was a primary concern among participants. In my preparation for this study, language acquisition seemed to be more relevant to educators (e.g., Klingner & Harry, 2006) but this proved to be wrong. Social workers, even those in divisions with smaller numbers of ELLs, are aware that language acquisition is a lengthy process and believe it is misunderstood or not well supported in the schools. Participants wanted more education and training on this topic and were often frustrated at the lack of knowledge about language acquisition among other professionals.

Consistent with the literature (e.g., Capps & Fortuny, 2006; Fong, 2004), participants in this study painted a picture of ELL students from families struggling with low paying jobs,

living in overcrowded housing and other issues related to poverty. Social workers were concerned about how this impacts the students and families beyond language acquisition.

### **Engaging Families of ELLs**

Participants struggled with engaging families especially due to language, work schedules, and cultural understandings of mental health, disability, and the role of parents in education. This is consistent with the existing literature (e.g., Bailey, 1999; Harry, 2008; Torres-Burgo, et al., 1999), though the existing literature includes discussions of the dissatisfaction of families with the process not just the struggle for professionals to engage the families.

ELL students from families with socioeconomic problems have the same challenges as non-ELL students in similar economic positions, such as crowded housing and transportation problems. This is not a unique sphere of problems; but there are unique challenges associated with ELL families overcoming socioeconomic problems such as documentation related to parents ability to work, or underemployment due to language barriers, all of which make it very difficult to secure family involvement in the ELL student solution.

### **Community Connections**

ELL students and their families have emotional, social, economic, legal, and health needs that could be alleviated or improved with access to appropriate community resources, which could then serve to alleviate the school-based problems. Unfortunately, many of the resources are not available, or are available but not appropriate or accessible by the families. Not having access to resources has the potential to contribute to disproportional representation in special education.

A major problem for accessing resources is that ELL students may be from “mixed status” families, meaning some members have legal documentation for being in the United States and some do not. Parents might be hesitant to seek services or might not know they or their children qualify for them. This was described by the participants and found in previous research (Capps & Passel, 2004; Capps, et al., 2006).

### **Professional Setting**

In this study, the social workers seemed generally content with levels of professional collaboration, particularly in formal meetings. Social workers did express some frustration with teachers’ and other professionals’ understanding of trauma and language acquisition, and when to make special education referrals. There is little in the literature about this topic as it relates to working with ELLs. One study did find when it came to working with culturally and linguistically diverse students with exceptionalities, school-based professionals understood little about each other’s roles; had little preparation; and did not receive adequate support to collaborate with others in the school (Roache, Shore, Gouleta, & Butkevich, 2003).

### **Special Education Process**

There is great variety in the ability to conduct linguistically and culturally competent assessments from the perspective of participants. While some schools struggle with when and how to assess ELLs, others are using the Ortiz matrix (a linguistically and culturally relevant approach to assessment). In fact, believing it be the best approach, one division chose to use the Ortiz matrix to re-evaluate ELL students qualified under different assessments.

Special education is intended for children in need of services because of a disability. But in some cases, it is viewed as a last resort to provide ELL student with support services. This is certainly not universal—some of the participants emphasized that unless the child has

a disability, special education is not a good option and will not provide the types of services they need (though the students are still being referred there).

Social workers who discussed pre-referral interventions generally referred to these as classroom or instruction based and had no or little role in implementation of the interventions. Some specifically mentioned “Response to Intervention” (RTI), though this is being used to varying degrees in different schools. Interestingly, on a national level RTI is designed to include strong participation from a variety of professionals, including social workers (School Social Workers Association of America, 2006), but Virginia’s version of RTI is called “Responsive Instruction” and is focused on instructional techniques only.

In terms of the special education decision-making process, from referral to placement, much of what was found by Klingner and Harry (2006) in their three year grounded study of 21 meetings for 19 students was confirmed from the social work perspective in this study (social workers were not included in the 2006 study). Participants in this study mirrored the serious concerns that Klingner and Harry found related to the understanding of language acquisition, a main concern in both studies. Participants in this study and Klingner and Harry’s found special education evaluation often completed by psychologists without context. Klingner and Harry discuss the lack of classroom context in special education evaluations conducted by the psychologist (2006). Participants in this study mentioned the lack of the home context in evaluations conducted by the psychologists. The Klingner and Harry study found psychologists play a dominant role in meetings (2006). Social workers in this study had mixed impressions of psychologists, some reporting their dominance in meetings and some considering them as helpful partners in assessment.

Disproportional representation of ELL students in special education was a driving problem for this research. This study did not collect data about the existence of disproportionality, though some participants mentioned that their school did have some disproportional representation. This study also did not definitively point to a cause of the problem, nor was that the intention. Rather, the social work participants were able to describe some of the problems with meeting the needs of ELLs which could lead to disproportional representation.

The four potential reasons for disproportional representation found in the literature were: discrimination and bias (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Mehan, Hertweck&Miehls, 1986;Sleeter, 1986); socio-economic factors (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb &Wishner, 1994; problems with assessment and evaluation (Klingner& Harry, 2006; Palmer, Olivarez, Wilson & Fordyce, 1989;Schon, Shaftel, & Markham, 2008); and access to and availability of resources (e.g., Conger, 2007; Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb &Wishner, 1994; Hardin, 2009). Participants did mention discrimination, bias, and socio-economic factors as problems in the school setting and the community. For them, assessment, evaluation, and access to and availability of resources were more directly linked to disproportional representation.

Special education assessment and evaluation can sometimes cause disproportional representation. For example, one district with a high ELL population chose to use a culturally and linguistically relevant assessment to re-evaluate students who had already been found eligible for special education, suggesting that the previous approach to assessment was flawed and may have allowed over representation of ELLs in special education through mis-identification of the presence of a disability. The findings of this study suggest that

psychologists were sometimes using non-culturally or linguistically relevant assessments, which could lead to disproportional representation. Some divisions, though, had assessments normed for ELL students and had bilingual assessments available which to the participants, mitigated against disproportionality.

Finally, the existing literature and participants in this study both pointed to the lack of resources as a major concern and a possible cause of disproportional representation. While many divisions reported adequate access to interpreters and translators, some acknowledged not having translated forms; not having access to interpreters in every language; not knowing how to use an interpreter; and frustration with not having bilingual staff, similar to findings in Hardin (2009). As demonstrated in other studies (e.g., Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb & Wishner, 1994), when school resources are few, some participants reported knowing referrals are made as an effort to obtain resources for ELL students.

### **Social Work**

Social workers in this study are concerned about a lack of knowledge and understanding of language acquisition and trauma for ELLs. For them, there are topics that could benefit from more knowledge, such as learning disabilities; but a better understanding of language acquisition and trauma were mentioned frequently as the foundation to better support ELLs.

Social work responsibilities differ widely from school to school. Social workers might participate in child study teams; intervene when there are behavior problems; conduct evaluations—or not. However, the commonality is that social workers are usually the ones responsible for bridging the gaps between school and home and home and community. This is

sometimes done in conjunction with or with help from a liaison or a visiting teacher, but most often this is the sole responsibility of the social worker.

### **Implications**

This research was intended to explore the social work perspective on ELLs entering special education, recognizing that there was no existing research on the topic from the social work perspective and very little on the topic from the perspective of educators. It is a beginning, a first step towards understanding this problem. Social work research does not exist in a vacuum, and this research was undertaken with the expectation that a better understanding of this problem would contribute to the advancement of social justice for ELL students. Much is expected, too, of the grounded researcher as the product is expected to be relevant for the participants and the various publics. What follows is a blueprint for the next steps in social policy, social work practice, social work education, and research.

### **Social policy**

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* from the perspective of the participants, has put a great deal of pressure on school personnel to make adequate yearly progress. This sometimes results in teachers looking to special education when a child does not seem to be making fast enough progress. In 2006 the Title 1 regulations changed so that limited English proficient (LEP) students are required to participate in math and science testing upon arrival in the school, but are exempt from one administration of the reading and language arts test. Scores from LEP students are a subcategory, and thus exempt, from AYP for a period of time and former LEP students can be included in the subcategory reporting for two years.



In addition to being concerned about the pressure on the schools to achieve AYP, social workers believed that some students would simply never be able to score well on tests. Apparently, their peers in education agree:

Unlike the black-white achievement gap and the poor-affluent achievement gap, which can at least theoretically be eliminated, the achievement gap between the category of children designated limited English proficient and the category of children designated fluent English proficient (FEP) can *never* be eliminated. ... An LEP child is from an immigrant or non-English speaking family who scores low in English. If you define a group by their low test scores, that group *must* have low test scores..." (Rossell, 2006, p. 29)

Some were concerned about language acquisition, generally, fearing that students might be unable to develop academic language in either their native language or English. In particular, social workers in divisions with a large number of refugees or other students who enter the country with little or no formal education believe the students might never be able to “catch up” academically to their peers which will have important financial and other implications in school systems.

Participants did not provide specific recommendations for how NCLB might change; however, based on my experience with this project, I would recommend a strengths approach to policy development (Chapin, 2011). The results of this study barely skim the surface of the first few steps to policy development; but it is a start. The first two steps are to “define the needs or social problems and strengths in partnership with clients” and “document needs, strengths, and goals in partnership with clients” (Chapin, 2011, p. 171). This project suggests that a broader understanding of who constitutes the client population could serve to improve

the policy experience for all stakeholders. This project suggests that social workers should be considered clients, as well as teachers, and administrators, in addition to students and their families. Because the implementation requirements and related outcomes of NCLB are not focused on families or students (whom we might typically think of as “clients”), all stakeholders in the intent of the policy, its implementation and the experience of that implementation should be included in defining and documenting the needs. With a larger view of the stake-holding population more efficient and effective changes might be possible.

### **Social work practice**

Based on the findings in this study, there are many areas for practice change and improvement for social workers and, to some extent, school personnel as a whole. Within and among schools, there is a need for improved collaboration and assessment approaches including improved sharing of empirically based best practices with ELLs. As the bridge between school and home, and home and community, there is a great need for resource advocacy on the part of school social workers because it is clear that without the community-based services, the schools are not able to do what is in the best interest of ELLs. The school social workers should be expected to go beyond the school system network to the community to develop or extend the human services available to these children and their families.

**In-school collaboration.** However, most of the action relative to ELL students occurs in the four walls of the school, which is where these changes must begin. Professionals and, to some extent, families, are collaborating within the school. Roles are defined in most school divisions and each person brings their knowledge and areas of responsibility to the table, both informally (e.g., hallway discussions about student needs) or formally (e.g., child study team meetings). What is missing is interdisciplinary collaboration that elevates these interactions to

a new level—perhaps one of advocacy or change in the system. For example, rather than just contributing a specific piece to the effort, such as sharing the results of an assessment, a collaborative effort could be made to consider all the input—from classroom teaching to home life—into that assessment and how those things could improve.

**Collaboration across school divisions.** Assessment of ELL students by social workers and other school personnel varied greatly from division to division. There is not a one size fits all approach to assessment, nor does every division necessarily have the need or capacity for certain approaches. However, it was striking that some schools were struggling greatly with assessment, while others felt they had a strong approach with appropriate attention to cultural and linguistic differences. School divisions need to disseminate information about what works in their system, as well as collaborate about how to improve processes. This can be done through professional associations, such as the Virginia Association of Visiting Teachers/School Social Workers. Dissemination can occur during conferences or even conference calls designed to deal with special topics (e.g., one social worker in this study sounded desperate for a culturally and linguistically appropriate adaptive behaviors assessment tool, while another was very pleased with the available resource). Social workers from high-ELL school systems should lead the way in this collaboration by offering workshops at conferences; organizing phone calls; sending information via e-mail or publishing in newsletters; becoming a mentor to a social worker in a low-ELL school division; or participating in building evidence towards evidence-based practices with ELL students (see the research section for a discussion on this topic).

**Advocacy.** Perhaps the greatest implication for social work practice is the need for increased advocacy related to resources that meet the needs of ELLs. It is at the margin

between the ELL child and his or her family and the community that the work of the school social worker can have the most impact, if the role of the school social worker can be seen to include larger scale client advocacy. The data demonstrated the need for adequate, appropriate, and accessible resources for ELLs. ELL students and their families need access to counseling, health care, economic assistance, and legal resources for the student to have a chance of success in the school system. For many ELL families, the increased scrutiny of legal status has created a culture of fear that prohibits accessing resources even when they are available to the student or family. Even in areas with seemingly adequate resources—such as bilingual therapy—at least one bilingual social worker was concerned that the resources were improperly advertised and were neither bilingual nor bicultural. Social workers, more than any other school-based professional, should have the practice skills through change agency to create and extend community support and resources targeted at the specific beyond-school-needs of ELLs.

### **Social work education**

The participants in this study reported learning by “doing” and participating in workshops. Their skills were not developed through formal education. The Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) standards currently has no educational requirements related to competencies in responding to the needs of immigrants or their children, despite the growing numbers of ELLs in schools and requiring social services. Because of the spreading ELL population from old growth to new growth areas, school divisions that have never had ELL families are now seeing them enroll in their schools. Social workers in every part of the country, in every capacity, have a growing need to understand the needs of immigrants and their families.

Immigrants and their needs can be considered in the context of cultural competence requirements for all social work students. Standards for the specialization or certification of school social workers should be extended to include required content on immigrant policy and direct practice with immigrant children and their families both within the school system and their communities. Social workers should be taught how to assess ELL students and families in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways, as well as assess the availability of culturally and linguistically appropriate resources. Not having access to the right resources can lead to disproportional representation in special education in the school system, and may have other consequences in the community (i.e., does the disconnect between needs and resources for immigrants lead to disproportional representation in other community level spheres of service such as emergency rooms because of lack of health care?).

There are two areas mentioned by participants that seem to require more knowledge and understanding: language acquisition and trauma. These areas were often mentioned in terms of what social workers thought others need to understand better, but social workers also need more training on these issues. Trauma is a far-reaching concept that is not only (or always) applicable to ELLs and their families and could be taught in the social work curriculum. An understanding of trauma will lead to more accurate assessment, as trauma can be the underlying cause for a variety of emotional and behavioral problems.

Language acquisition, on the other hand, is a ubiquitous issue to ELLs by definition, but social workers need only a basic understanding to do fulfill their roles well. Knowledge of language acquisition could be taught in workshops either in the school or as part of social work training. As both trauma and language acquisition are integral to understanding ELLs,

and as the ELL population continues to grow in terms of numbers and geography, it is important for all social workers to have a basic introduction to both concepts.

## **Research**

The goal of grounded theory is to develop a theory based on the main concern and the core variable that resolves it. This project produced a theory that requires further testing. The theory is that supporting ELLs (the core variable) resolves the problem of the disconnect between the needs of ELLs and the resources available to them (the main concern). A second area of implications for future research is related to evidence-based practice. Finally, I make suggestions for future research related to the topic and main problem, but not central to the grounded theory.

**Theory testing.** The main outcome of this research is the grounded theory, which posits that school personnel conducting appropriate needs assessments and linking ELL students to culturally and linguistically relevant resources support ELLs, which can help minimize unnecessary referrals to special education. Theory testing would involve operationalizing concepts, an examination of the relationship between needs and resources, and the extent to which identifying needs and matching to resources reduces overrepresentation in special education. There are four primary concepts that require operationalization prior to theory testing: needs; resources; trauma; and RTI.

Testing this theory requires a number of steps. The appropriateness of assessment in terms of culture, language, and time (as it relates to special education referrals) must be considered. Availability, accessibility, and appropriateness of resources must be established. Finally, the research could move towards establishing correlation of assessment and resources to the proportionality of special education referrals and placements.

**Evidence-based practice.** A major limitation—and source of frustration—in this study was the small number of participants, which could be related to their experience in social work research courses. Some of the frustration was related to identifying a sampling frame as there is no state list of school social workers, nor is there contact information readily available by division. The major stumbling block, however, was in recruitment.

This study did not attempt to identify why school social workers were not participating in this study, so I will speculate. They certainly could have been too busy or not interested in the topic, and I cannot change that. However, they also might not understand the importance of participating in research. Research courses accredited by CSWE are required to teach evidence-based practice, which suggests practitioners should be able to evaluate their own practice and understand research by others. We do not, as a profession, explain the importance of *participating* in research. This is not only a way to help out a struggling researcher like me, but it advances our profession; has the potential to give voice to the voiceless (our clients); and empower social workers as individuals.

Social workers in this study were interested in providing the best interventions and conducting the best assessments available for ELL students. A couple participants were well versed in research and recognized the importance of using tools that had been tested with the ELL population. Most, though, wanted the best tools but did not demonstrate an understanding of how to find them. Social workers in any field must be better prepared to find and evaluate best practices, and recognize the limitations particularly with culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

**Related areas of research.** In addition to theory testing, the main area of future research, there are other areas for further research that are offshoots from the main theory.

Social workers want adequate and appropriate assessment and evaluation tools for ELL students. The Culture-Language Interpretive Matrices (C-LIM), called the “Ortiz matrix” by the participants, was mentioned as one of these tools and has been used by some divisions with, from their perspective, great success. The literature does not yet support this. Although this is primarily an educational assessment tool, social workers should be supporting and encouraging research on this and other tools. Social work assessment can be enhanced by improving assessment tools or testing existing ones, such conducting research on whether or not the Vineland Adaptive Behavior scale is valid and reliable with ELL students.

There are a number of other relationships that could be tested and questions that could be explored in further study. These include:

- How do schools with higher percentages of ELL students differ compared to schools with lower percentages of ELL students in terms of access to resources in school and out of school? And how does that relate to ELL students in special education?
- How do the differing expectations of the social worker in each school division impact assessment of ELL students? Outcomes? Disproportional representation?
- At what point in time (relative to engagement in the special education process) are ELL students assessed? And how does that relate to referrals to special education?
- To what extent are ELLs assessed using holistic or ecological approaches?
- Do certain roles and responsibilities of the school social worker lead to improved outcomes for ELL students?



- What are social workers being taught about participating in research?
- Testing of specific assessment tools for ELLs.

### **Reflections on this Approach**

#### **Empowerment Approach**

The empowerment approach was essential to how this research was conceived with an assumption that families and social workers were not the ones who held the power in decision-making around ELLs entering special education. This assumption seemed accurate from the social work perspective. Social workers believed families to be only marginally included in decision-making, sometimes unable to participate or not understanding their role or potential role in the process. Multi-disciplinary meetings were often dominated by a school psychologist, not necessarily because of personality, but because the psychologist conducted most of the assessments which determined special education eligibility. This meant what the psychologist recommended based on the assessments—whether culturally and linguistically appropriate or not—was often what the group decided. Social workers themselves wanted to see change in the system but felt powerless to do anything about it.

It is unclear from this research the cause or source of the disempowerment of social workers, and therefore unclear where in the system it would best be addressed. Empowerment can be encouraged during social work education, in particular by teaching about power distribution, supporting the development of professional characteristics and requiring critical thinking skills. Disempowerment may also come post-graduation, in the host agency (in this case, the school system) due to constraints of policy, fulfillment of roles in collaborative efforts, frustration with the lack of resources, or other reasons. This could be addressed through peer to peer support. Social worker empowerment is critical to helping ELL families

who are often disempowered and need the support of social workers to make lasting changes in the school system and on behalf of their own children.

### **Strengths of the Research**

The classic grounded theory design allowed “what is” rather than “what should be” to present itself through this process. The small amount of existing research that had been done on the topic of ELLs entering special education was from the educators perspective; obviously an essential perspective but one of many involved in this process. This research was the first study to include the social work perspective on the topic. The theory discovered in this study can be tested and expanded, providing the groundwork for a deeper understanding of ELLs in special education. In particular, this theory speaks to possible causes of disproportional representation which warrants further research.

### **Critique of Approach**

Though grounded theory was the best fit for this research given the lack of information on this topic, CGT was not a perfect approach. There are many strands of grounded theory, and this study used the “classic” approach which follows the original recommendations in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser recommendations after his split from Strauss (Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992; Glaser, 1998). There is an unusual focus on producing a public product not just for the consumption and use of the participants, but also to increase one’s own career and stature (e.g., Glaser, 1998, p. 205). It would be incredible to assert that completing this dissertation was not done in part to contribute to my own professional advancement, it is equally ludicrous to me to feel get giddy about this aspect of the study (Glaser, 1998, p. 205).

One of the major drawbacks of this approach is Glaser's insistence on researcher isolation because of the belief that talking to others will dim the excitement of discovery and put a new spin on the understanding of the data (e.g., Glaser, 1998, pp. 49-51). Glaser insists grounded theory can be undertaken without a grounded theory mentor, though ways to collaborate and learn are mentioned (e.g., Glaser, 1998, p. 6). CGT is focused on self-pacing and self-discovery, such that one engages in the process of data collection, constant comparison, memoing, and writing followed by a period of time away from the work, with a return to it to view it anew (Glaser, 1992; Glaser 1998). This isolation and self-pacing did indeed lead to a middle of the night a-ha moment. Feedback from participants pushed me further towards theory discovery. However, the most important breakthroughs were only achieved in conjunction with the chair of this dissertation. In other words, isolation only brought me so far and this theory was incomplete without the eyes of a qualitative expert.

### **Conclusions**

While ELL students are struggling in schools, professionals and families are struggling to help them and to resolve the disconnect between their needs and the resources that could meet the needs. Some of the struggle is one of knowledge, such as understanding the stages of language acquisition. Some of the struggle is one of not fully understanding the needs of ELL students because there is a lack of holistic or ecological assessment, especially prior to involvement with the special education process. But mostly, the struggle is recognizing and understanding the needs of ELLs and not being able to offer help because resources are not available or inaccessible.

The participants painted a complex picture of needs and attempts to support ELLs by properly assessing need and linking to available resources. The roles of social workers vary

widely by school division, as does the ELL related characteristics of the division. The path to meeting the needs of ELLs is paved with tough federal policy, overworked professionals, cultural and linguistic needs of families that might go unmet, and unintended consequences of special education placement. In the face of these struggles, though, social workers demonstrate an understanding of trauma, language acquisition and the special education process.

The theory originating from this study suggests social workers and other school personnel make every effort to assess ELL students using culturally and linguistically appropriate instruments in an effort to support ELLs. When needs are accurately identified, ELLs are linked to available resources and when the most appropriate resources are not available they are connected to anything that might help them. This sometimes includes special education and can contribute to the disproportional representation of ELL students, but comes from a place of support and concern for the students.

School divisions vary widely in terms of ELL characteristics (including percentages of the population, languages spoken, and length of time ELLs have resided in the division) and expectations of social workers. There is fertile ground for further inquiry here, and without it we cannot make necessary changes to policy and practices. Continuing to study this population and problem is both a matter of social justice and practicality. Social workers continue to offer a voice for vulnerable populations and agitate the system with them on their behalf because we expect better outcomes for ELL students. Simultaneously, the number of ELLs grows throughout the country and school divisions have no choice but to learn how to assess and provide for their needs.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Letters



### Recruitment Letters

*1. When the flyer is sent by the researcher to the Virginia Association of Visiting Teachers/School Social Workers (VAVTSSW) public mailing list by attachment to e-mail the following would be included:*

Subject: Seeking school social workers for study

Body:

Dear School Social Worker,

I am looking for school social workers to participate in a study on English language learners entering special education. You are being contacted because you were listed as a member of the Virginia Association of Visiting Teachers/School Social Workers.

The attached flyer will tell you more about the study. If you know other social workers who might be interested in participating, you may share the flyer with them.

Thank you,  
Kerry Fay Vandergrift, PhD Candidate  
Virginia Commonwealth University

*One month after the initial e-mail to VAVTSSW members, the following email will be sent:*

Dear School Social Worker,

About a month ago I contacted you about participating in a study and I have not heard from you. Just a reminder, I am looking for school social workers to participate in a study on English language learners entering special education. You are being contacted because you were listed as a member of the Virginia Association of Visiting Teachers/School Social Workers.

The attached flyer will tell you more about the study. If you know other social workers who might be interested in participating, you may share the flyer with them.

Thank you,  
Kerry Fay Vandergrift, PhD Candidate  
Virginia Commonwealth University

*2. When the flyer is sent by research participants to social workers who may be interested in participating, the participant will be asked to include this message:*

Subject: Seeking school social workers for study

[Name]

I recently participated in a study about school social workers perspectives on English language learners entering special education. I thought you might be interested in participating, too, and I am attaching the flyer with more information.

Signed,  
[Name]

## Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer



Virginia Commonwealth University  
Research Recruitment Flyer

# Needed: School Social Workers Input on English Language Learners Entering Special Education

**Who?** Currently employed Virginia school social workers who hold a social work degree from an accredited social work program are eligible to participate in this study.

**What?** This study will ask about your experiences and opinions as a social worker on English language learners (ELLs) entering special education. Other social workers will be interviewed, too, and together the information will form a theory about English language learners entering special education.

**Why?** ELLs are entering special education at disproportional rates (usually this means they are in special education at much higher rates than children who are not ELLs). There is no research on this topic from a social work perspective, so *this is a way for your voice to be heard!*

**When?** You and I will schedule a face-to-face or telephone interview based on a mutually agreeable time and place. The interview will last about one hour, and I may ask if I can follow-up with another interview or e-mail to clarify or expand on something we talked about.

**Benefits and risks.** There are no foreseen direct benefits or significant risks to participation in this study. The primary benefit is that *you will be helping other social workers* understand this topic better by contributing to the knowledge of ELLs entering special education.

**How?** If you are interested in participating or have more questions about participation, contact me by email or phone:

Kerry Fay Vandergrift  
[vandergriftf@vcu.edu](mailto:vandergriftf@vcu.edu)  
703-945-7049

Version 1; 9/12/10

APPROVED

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## Appendix C: Recruitment Script



### Recruitment Script

*This script will be used with interested people known to the researcher and with people who initiate contact in response to the flyer. The script can be used in person or over the phone.*

I am Kerry Fay Vandergrift, a PhD student at Virginia Commonwealth University, and I am recruiting social workers for a study on English language learners entering special education. I am reading this to you because you have expressed interest in learning more about how to participate in this study.

This study will ask about your experiences and opinions as a social worker on English language learners entering special education. Other social workers will be interviewed, too, and together the information will form a theory about English language learners entering special education.

You and I will schedule a face-to-face or telephone interview based on a mutually agreeable time and place. The interview will last about one hour, and I may ask if I can follow-up with another interview or e-mail to clarify or expand on something we talked about.

If you agree to participate in the study and change your mind, you will be allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. If you tell me you would like to participate I will ask a couple questions about your eligibility and, if you are eligible, I will give you the consent form to read.

Would you like to find out if you qualify to participate?

*No:* Thank you for your interest. If you change your mind you may contact me at [vandergriftk@vcu.edu](mailto:vandergriftk@vcu.edu) or 703-945-7049.

*Yes:* Only currently employed Virginia school social workers who hold a social work degree from an accredited social work program are eligible to participate in this study, so I will ask you a couple questions to make sure you are able to participate.

Are you a currently employed Virginia school social worker?

*No:* Unfortunately you do not qualify to participate in this study. Thank you for your time. *(end)*

*Yes: (next question)*

Do you hold a BSW or MSW?

*No: Unfortunately you do not qualify to participate in this study. Thank you for your time. (end)*

*Yes: (next question)*

The next question is about the accreditation of the school where you earned your BSW or MSW. Most schools that offer BSWs and MSWs are accredited. If you do not know if your school is accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) I can help you find out. Did you earn your BSW or MSW from a school with CSWE accreditation?

*No: Unfortunately you do not qualify to participate in this study. Thank you for your time.*

*I don't know/I'm not sure/maybe: What is the name of your school?*

*(Accredited Virginia schools: )*

*Name is on the list: Yes, the school is accredited and you are eligible to participate.*

*Name is not on the list: I will find out if the school is accredited and contact you. Thank you for your time. (End. If school is accredited the script will restart with the next section).*

*Yes: You are eligible to participate in this study. Now I will give you a copy of the consent form for you to read and sign when you are ready to make a decision about participating. You may also ask me any questions you have about the study.*

## Appendix D: Informed Consent



### RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

**TITLE:** The Social Work Perspective on English Language Learners Entering Special Education

**VCU IRB NO.:** H M 1 3 2 3 3

If anything in this form is confusing, please ask me to explain it to you. You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to get information from social workers about their work with English language learner's (ELLs) entering special education. ELLs are immigrants, and sometimes their children or grandchildren, who are learning to speak English. This study is about ELLs who might be referred or have been referred for special education. The opinions and ideas you and other social workers share will be used to develop a new theory on this topic.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT

If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered and understand what will happen to you.

For this study you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting about one hour or less. The interview will take place either face-to-face, in a place we both agree on, or by telephone. I may ask if I can contact you again if I have more questions. This contact could be either face-to-face or by telephone, depending upon your preference.

In the interview you will be asked about the needs of ELLs, engaging families of ELLs, connections to the community, the professional setting you are in, the special education process, and how social work relates to this topic.

There will be up to 35 participants and up to half of the participants will be asked for follow-up interviews. If you participate early in the study, I may ask if I can come back to talk to you as I learn new things from other people so I can get your input on the new ideas. Also, I will choose one or two interested people who told me a lot of new and different things to look at the theory as it develops and see if it is accurate.

#### RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Little or no risk is expected from participating in this study. You do not have to talk about any subjects you do not want to talk about, you can skip the question or end the interview. If you become upset, I can give you names of counselors to contact so you can get help in dealing with these issues.

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**BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS**

You may not get any direct benefit from this study, but, the information we learn from people in this study may help other social workers and ELLs entering special education.

**COSTS**

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the interview(s).

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of interview notes. Data is being collected only for research purposes. Interview notes will be marked with only your first initial and contact information will be stored separately from the notes. Handwritten notes will be kept in a locked file cabinet and electronic information will be password protected.

The things you say during the interview will not be shared with anyone including your employer, colleagues, or clients. Some direct quotes will be used in the final paper but will not be connected to you in any way. Mostly, the opinions and ideas you share during the interview(s) will be combined with other responses and presented in broad categories.

The findings will be included in a dissertation and may be presented in meetings or published papers, but your name will never be used.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may choose to participate in one interview and not answer follow-up questions, if I have any. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

**QUESTIONS**

In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact:

Mary Katherine O'Connor, PhD  
Professor  
School of Social Work  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
804-828-0688  
mkoconno@vcu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact:

Office for Research  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 113  
P.O. Box 980568

Richmond, VA 23298  
Telephone: 804-827-2157

You may also contact this number for general questions, concerns or complaints about the research. Please call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. Additional information about participation in research studies can be found at <http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm>.

### CONSENT

*I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.*

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Participant name printed	Participant signature	Date
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Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent  
Discussion / Witness<sup>3</sup>  
(Printed)

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Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion / Witness	Date
---	------

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Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above)	Date
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## Appendix E: Interview Protocol

**Needs of ELLs.** Tell me about the needs of ELLs?

- Compared to non-ELLs?
- Psychological needs?
- Socio-economic needs?
- Health needs?
- Policies?
- Resources?

**Engaging families of ELLs.** Tell me about engaging families of ELLs.

- Challenges and difficulties?
- Tangible resources? (e.g., translated documents)
- Cultural issues?
- Observed discrimination?
- Observed bias?

**Professional setting.** Tell me about the professional setting in which you work, in relation to ELLs entering special education.

- Collaboration?
- Administrative policies?
- Support?
- Training?
- Roles of others?

**Community connections.** \Thinking about working with ELLs entering special education, can you tell me about connection to the community (outside of the school)?

- Availability of resources?
- Access to resources?
- Appropriateness of resources?
- Community climate?
- Legal status problems?

**Special education process.** Tell me about the special education process for ELLs.

- Stages of process: Pre-referral? Referral? Determination?
- Compared to non-ELLs?
- Meetings?
- Policies?
- Practices?

**Social work.** Can you talk about the relationship between the profession of social work and ELLs entering special education?

- Roles?
- Values?
- Knowledge?
- Professional expectations?
- Expectations of others?
- Status of social work(ers)?

## Vita

Kerry Fay Vandergrift  
Birth date: September 25, 1974  
Birth place: Brunswick Maine  
Citizenship: United States of America

### EDUCATION

#### Doctor of Philosophy

Virginia Commonwealth University, School of Social Work, May 2012  
*Dissertation Chair:* Mary Katherine O'Connor, PhD  
*Substantive Area:* Immigrant children with special needs.

#### Master of Social Work

University of Maryland, School of Social Work, May 2002  
*Concentration:* Management and Community Organization  
*Specialization:* Social Action and Community Development  
GPA 3.94

#### Bachelor of Science, Shepherd University, May 1999

*Major:* Social Work  
*Summa Cum Laude*

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

#### Radford University, School of Social Work, Radford, VA

*Assistant Professor, 2011*

SOWK 350 Social Work Research Methods  
SOWK 424 Interventive Methods IV: Macro Practice  
SOWK 679 Advanced Standing Bridge II: Policy and Research  
SOWK 772 Research II: Advanced Research Methodology

#### George Mason University, Department of Social Work, Fairfax, VA

*Adjunct Professor, 2011:* Research Methods for Social Workers (MSW)  
*Adjunct Professor, 2011:* Introduction to Social Work—online (BSW)  
*Adjunct Professor, 2010:* Research in Social Work (BSW)  
*Adjunct Professor, 2008:* Introduction to Social Work (BSW)

#### Shepherd University, Department of Social Work, Shepherdstown, WV

*Adjunct Professor, 2005:* Child Welfare



## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

### **Center for Workers with Disabilities, Washington, DC**

*Policy Analyst*

July 2006-January 2009

- Coordinated Youth in Transition task force, consisting of representatives from state and local government, national non-profits, and universities.
- Edited and contributed to the monthly newsletter, *Working for Tomorrow*.
- Provided technical assistance to states related to the Medicaid Buy-In (MBI) and Medicaid Infrastructure Grants (MIG).

### **National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, Washington, DC**

*Sr. Project Coordinator,*

March 2004-July 2006

- Work on behalf of and in conjunction with the state and local members of the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA) on national issues of child welfare practice.
- Coordinated and led projects for the workgroup on disproportionate minority representation in public child welfare.
- Provided on-site support, and ongoing assistance, to the Child Welfare Directors of Alabama and Mississippi immediately post-Hurricane Katrina.
- Participated in projects and conferences designed to increase cooperation between the Alcohol and Other Drug and Child Welfare communities through work with the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare (NCSACW), and groups including the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA), National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors (NASADAD), and the National Council on Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ).

### **West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Martinsburg, WV**

*Child Protective Service Worker*

May 1999-August 2001

- Completed initial assessments, crisis intervention, mediation, referrals for services, petitions to the court for legal action, reports to the court and determination of maltreatment in a family.
- Coordinated and facilitated multi-disciplinary team meetings consisting of medical personnel, attorneys, mental and behavioral health professionals, law enforcement, family members and others in an effort to develop reasonable, safe plans for children and families.

## INTERNSHIPS

### **International Social Services, Baltimore, MD**

*Case Management Intern*

August 2001-May 2002

- Advocate on behalf of and broker services for intercountry and repatriation clients, involving the coordination of services from affiliates in over 140 countries and domestic agencies including the US Department of State and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.
- Primary researcher of a study on international kinship care.
- Developed the first phase of an international staff exchange program.

**West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Martinsburg, WV**

*Child Protective Service Intern*

August 1998-May 1999

- Completed initial assessments and provided referrals for services.
- Conducted ongoing face-to-face meetings with families, in order to carry out plans to keep children safe and maintain families.

**Eastern Panhandle Training Center, Martinsburg, WV**

*Case Management intern and volunteer*

January 1998-August 1998

- Participated in case planning meetings, made home visits to assess living situations, and coached clients in activities of daily living.

**PUBLICATIONS**

Peer reviewed journal article

Naughton, D. & Fay, K. L. (2003). Of kin and culture: US children and international kinship care placements. *British Journal of Adoption and Fostering*, 27(4), 55-72.

Reports

American Public Human Services Association. (2005). *Report from the 2004 child welfare workforce survey*.

American Public Human Services Association. (2006). *Disproportional representation in child welfare: A survey of emerging promising practices*.

Community Publications

Vandergrift, K. F. (2007). *Violence against people with disabilities*. I-CAN! Accessibility Project.

Center for Workers with Disabilities. (2006-2009). *Working for Tomorrow* (newsletter).

**PRESENTATIONS**

*Social work with foreign born clients*. Virginia Commonwealth University German Exchange Program. 2008

*Women with disabilities: An analysis of welfare reform in Appalachia.* Virginia Commonwealth University Graduate Research Conference. 2007

*Macro social work: The challenges and the rewards.* Shepherd University, Social Work Association Social Work Month Celebration. 2005

*Selected social factors and their effects on reporting child abuse: A study of educators.* Mid-Atlantic Undergraduate Social Research Conference. 1999

## **RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

### **Virginia Commonwealth University**

*Graduate Research Assistant*, 2007-2008

Worked with Dr. Elizabeth Cramer on ongoing research projects. Conducted evaluation for *Resources for Independent Living Staff Training Curriculum: Domestic Violence and Legal Protections* training.

## **SELECTED HONORS**

Graduate School Assistantship, VCU, 2006-2008

Phi Kappa Phi, member

Certificate of Merit, for efforts on behalf of children, 2000

Social Work Outstanding Student of the Year, 1998-99

Alpha Kappa Delta, Outstanding Member of the Year, 1998-99

McMurrin Scholar, Shepherd University's highest honor, 1998

Title IV-E grant recipient, 1996-99

## **SELECTED COMMUNITY SERVICE**

Democratic Party of Virginia, 2008-2010

Center for Multicultural Human Services, 2007-2008

Student Coalition for Peace and Equality, UMB, 2001-2002

Big Brothers/Big Sisters, 1999-2005

Willowbrooke Coalition for the Homeless, 1994-1997

## **COMPUTER PROFICIENCY**

Blackboard

Atlas.ti

SPSS

Microsoft Office: Powerpoint, Word, Excel

## **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

National Association of Social Workers

Society for Social Work Research